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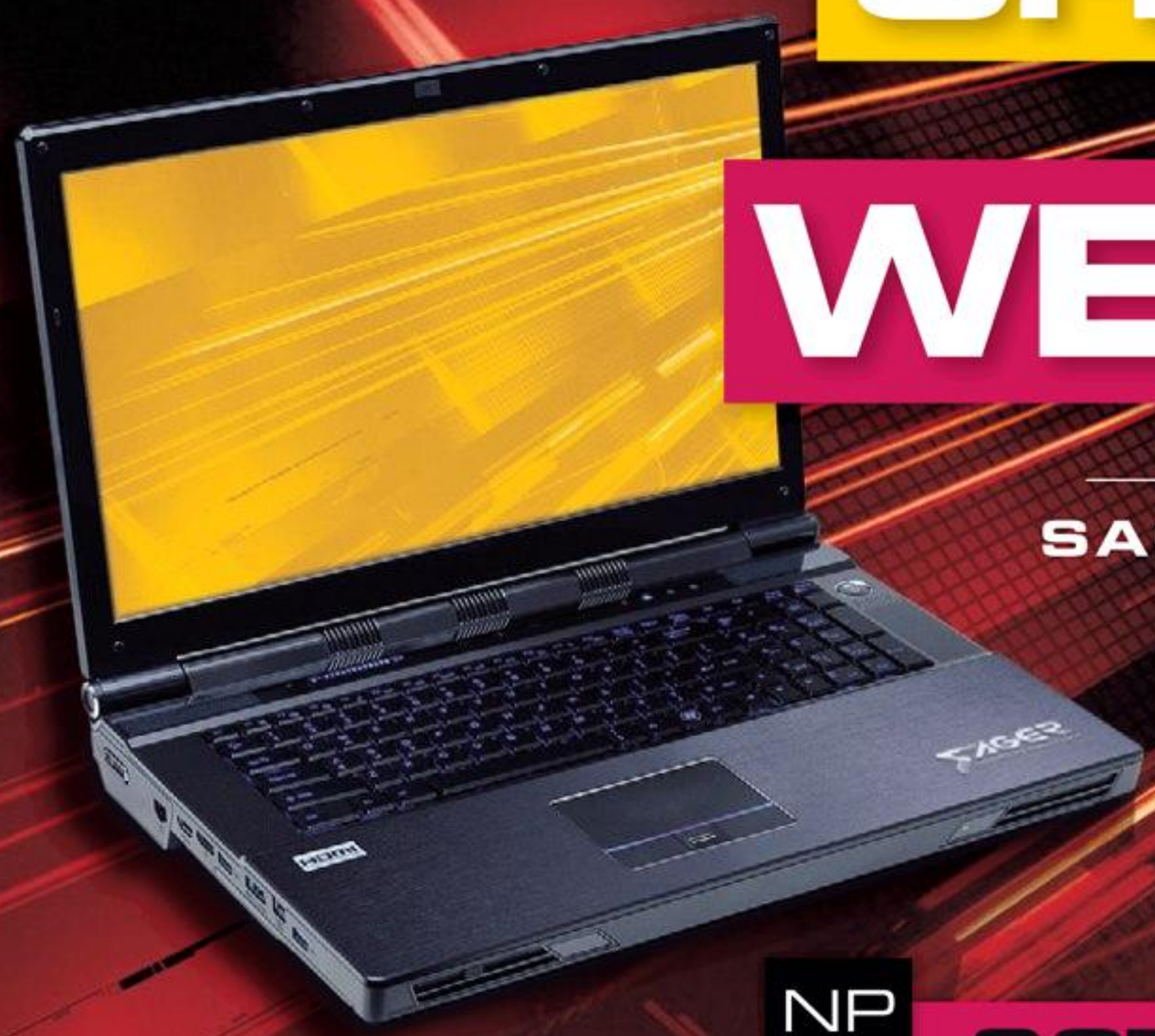

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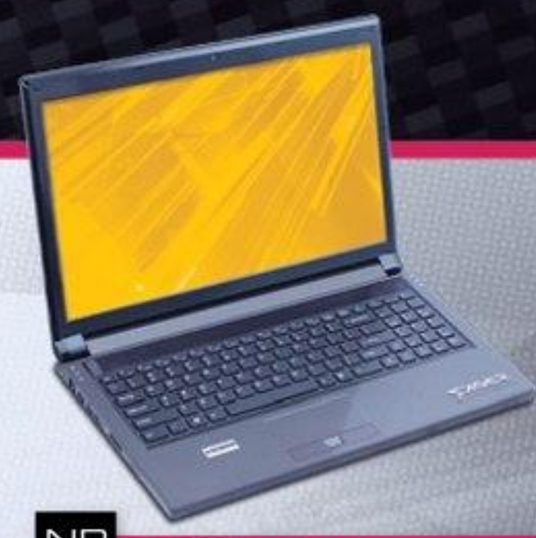

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Kid watches as the keyboard takes on the rain. Hard droplets comin' down. The 'board ain't never seen a downpour like this. Kid just waits, stares at the plastic buttons as they swim. Kid palms the keyboard after it's nice and damp; drops some coffee into it. Hot coffee. Drops in some soda for good measure. Kid can't be too careful when testin'. He plugs it in. That board still works. Kid grins.

# Gamers of the Year

In this issue, *PC Gamer* proudly announces the winners of our annual Games of the Year awards. I say "proudly" because we're all proud to have survived the nomination, debate, and voting experience. It's a grueling process requiring hours and hours of debate that include special pleadings, inspired speeches, harsh counter-arguments and the occasional hand gesture. We discuss about gameplay mechanics, evaluate the merits of art styles, share our highlights from levels, and talk about anything else we think elevated one game over another, or all of the others.

There are things that *don't* come up in these discussions, however, such as how much the game cost to make, or how long it took to make, and by how many. That's trivia. What matters is how resources are used.

Take a look at *Frozen Synapse*. The blueprint-inspired design is stripped of inessentials in order to keep the focus on what the game is all about: tactics. *Gemini Rue*'s low-resolution visuals are brilliantly executed, giving you just enough information to navigate with but abstracted enough that, once you become engrossed in the story, your imagination fills in the visual detail the same way it does when you're reading a book. It might have been a *worse* game with high-resolution graphics! And at the other end of the spectrum, Bethesda Game Studios didn't simply use its vast resources to hose extravagant art and textures everywhere and call it a day. Instead, it created *Skyrim*: an entire world that feels truly *alive*.

That's the glory that is PC gaming—a platform that welcomes and rewards the one-man or woman developer as much as it scales up to allow the richest and biggest studio to manifest its imagination on our displays. And that makes PC gamers the real winners.

**LOGAN DECKER**
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Twitter: @logandecker

## PLAYLIST

**Evan Lahti**
**Senior Editor**
Indie WWII strategizer *Unity of Command* only has one song, so I made a custom playlist of beard-stroking war music on Spotify.

**Chris Comiskey**
**Managing Editor**
I'm currently swimming in an awesome sea of games—*Bastion*, *Gemini Rue*, *Limbo*, *Might and Magic: Clash of Heroes*, to name just a few.

**Josh Augustine**
**Associate Editor**
I want to be an Agent—no, a Jedi! Fool, be a Trooper. Bounty Hunters are best! I'll never hit 50 in *The Old Republic* at this rate.

**Tyler Wilde**
**Associate Editor**
*Dustforce* keeps trying to pull me out, but I'm stuck in a loop of *Unreal Tournament 2004* instagib practice rounds. Must. Beat. The. Interns.


**PC GAMER** (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus Holiday issue following December issue by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Periodicals postage paid in San Bruno, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Basic subscription rates (12 issues) US: Digital $23.88; Print $19.95; Canada: Digital $23.88; Print $29.95; Intl: Digital $23.88; Print $39.95. Canadian and foreign orders must be prepaid, US funds only. Canadian price includes postage and GST #R128220688. PMA #40612608. Subscriptions do not include newsstand only specials. **POSTMASTER**: Send changes of address to PC Gamer, PO Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Standard Mail Enclosure in the following edition: None. Ride-Along Enclosure in the following editions: None. Returns: Pitney Bowes, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2, Canada. Future US, Inc. also publishes @Gamer, Crochet Today!, Your Knitting Life, Mac|Life, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, The Official Xbox Magazine, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, and Windows: The Official Magazine.


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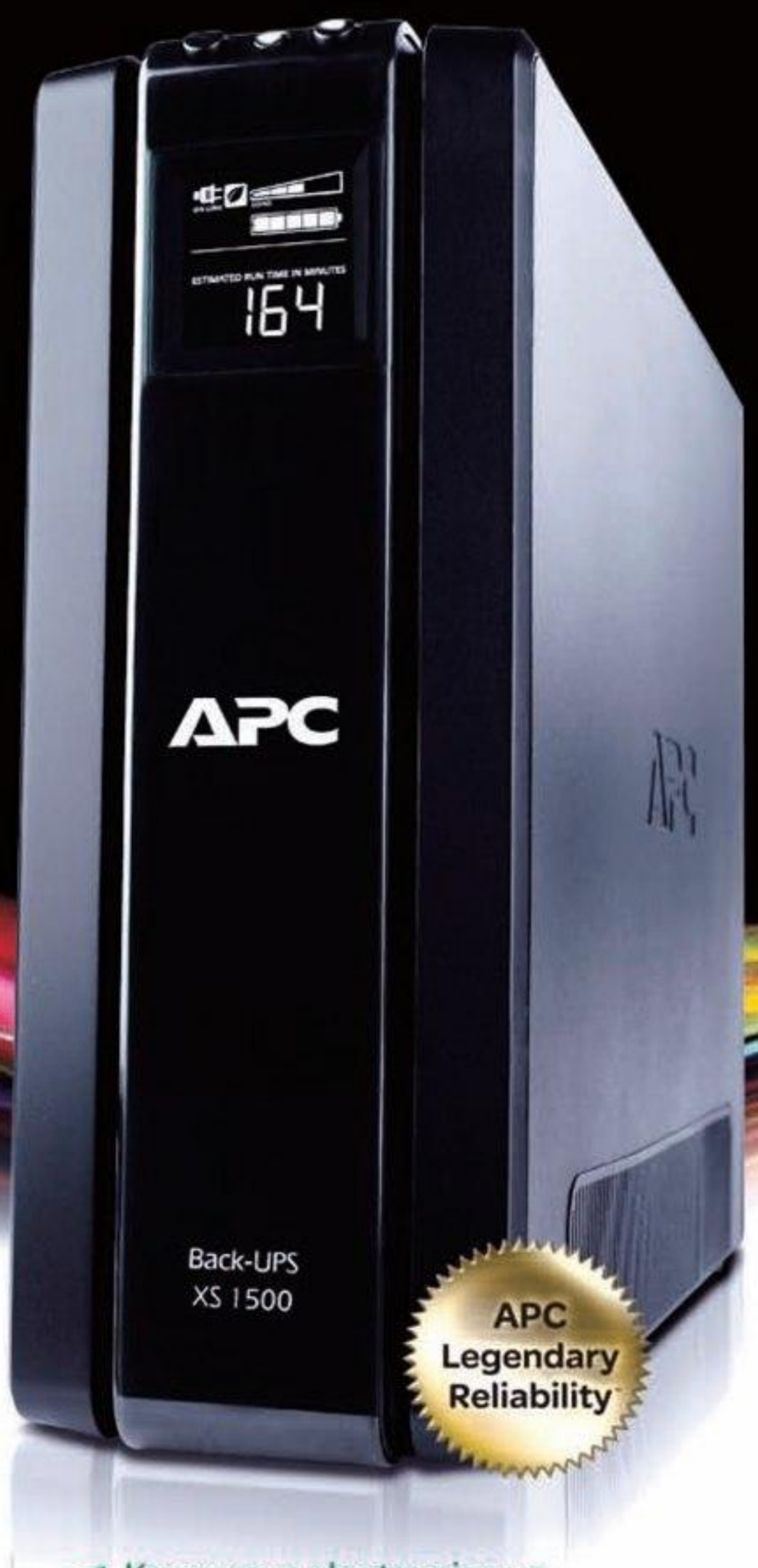


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Your emails, Facebooks, Tweets, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

## BACK CHATTER

- I still don't understand why *CS: GO* even exists. It's annoying how many side projects Valve has been doing instead of *Half-Life*. ***Max Saiger***
- What is it with the MMO genre? Eastern innovation; Western stagnation. ***BlackCompany***
- Saying *Mass Effect* multiplayer will break the game is like saying multiplayer broke *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. ***Anthony Kubli***
- Thanks to technological stagnation within video games, the rig I built this year should last me until, oh, 2030 or so. ***Broseidon91***
- I used to make villages in *Minecraft* 'til I took an arrow to the knee. ***Bakhari Burrell***
- I sure hope *Microsoft Flight* isn't all Microsoft had in mind when they said they were going to bring back the PC as a gaming platform. ***longnose***
- Aside from *SWTOR*, I haven't bought a game anywhere except Steam in over a year. ***Mike Vert***
- I want an epic *Max Payne* single-player experience (at least 12 hours), not a half-assed multiplayer wanna-be component. ***Azharan***

"Our modem is being reset. STAND DOWN, SOLDIER!"

### War is heck

What's your beef against *Battlefield 3* and *Modern Warfare 3*? You gave both scores clearly below what they should have been. They're excellent games. And why do you spend time reviewing their single-player campaigns? They're inconsequential—nobody expects anything from them.
***Chris Ajemian***

*We could rattle off the "we review the whole package" spiel, but more importantly, we're in total disagreement over the importance of single-player campaigns. Not only are the* Modern Warfare *campaigns generally compelling, they're what keeps the games from being considered annual $60 expansion packs. The primary reason* Battlefield 3 *bothered with a campaign, sad as it was compared to the multiplayer, is that lacking one would make it look like half of a product in comparison. You'll thank us when your internet goes down.* **PCG**

### The Older Scrolls

In both *Oblivion* and *Morrowind* my time was spent wandering around the vast, colorful landscapes. However, in *Skyrim* all I see so far is black and white (some dark green). The sub-Arctic is not all that varied or interesting. Same goes for the people and architecture.
***Peter Cortland***

Ugly?

*While* Skyrim's *default graphics are indeed a bit bleached, there is hope! For thus the gods said, "Let there be mods," and it was so. To pump up* Skyrim *with an amazing landscape, architecture, and NPC revamp, grab the following files, and follow the simple installation instructions for each (located under the "Description" tabs): http://bit.ly/xB5mI9.*

## THE HOT MAIL

### Time to get crafty

So I have been playing *Minecraft* for over a year now and it never disappoints. I just have this question that's been floating around my mind: did *Minecraft* create a new genre of games? Yes, there were sandbox games before, but there's something about *Minecraft* that shines out at me as something new. ***Nicholas Rago***

"Candygram."

***Excellent question! Most would probably call it a hybrid genre, but since* Minecraft *dabbles in so many, we risk exhausting the world's supply of hyphens to describe it (first-person-sandbox-tower-defense-roguelike-role-playing-LEGO-zombie-sim?). We're with you, Nicky, and move that* Minecraft *deserves a genre of its own. But the task of coming up with a good name is a tricky one. Perhaps, after enough time has passed, the genre will simply be known as "Minecraft?" Or is that just lazy—what do you think?* PCG**

Your feedback at *PC Gamer* is much beloved, so Nicholas is getting a copy of *Bastion* for being such a trailblazing thinker. Ping us at letters@pcgamer.com with a question, comment, or rage-fueled rant to earn your chance to win next month's **PRIZE OF MYSTERY**!

### Woe is *WoW*

I've noticed a trend recently: Every time a new MMORPG comes out everyone says the same thing: "It's going to destroy *World of Warcraft*!" I hate this talk. Why do games have to destroy each other? It's been really bad with *The Old Republic*, which is odd because they are very different games. One is fantasy and the other is sci-fi. I have no problem with the new MMOs, yet I always remain loyal to *WoW*.
***Phil Custer***

*Heavy wears the crown, Phil.* WoW *is a colossus, and every new contender is looked upon as an underdog and a challenger. We totally agree that nothing needs to be "destroyed," but you know how*



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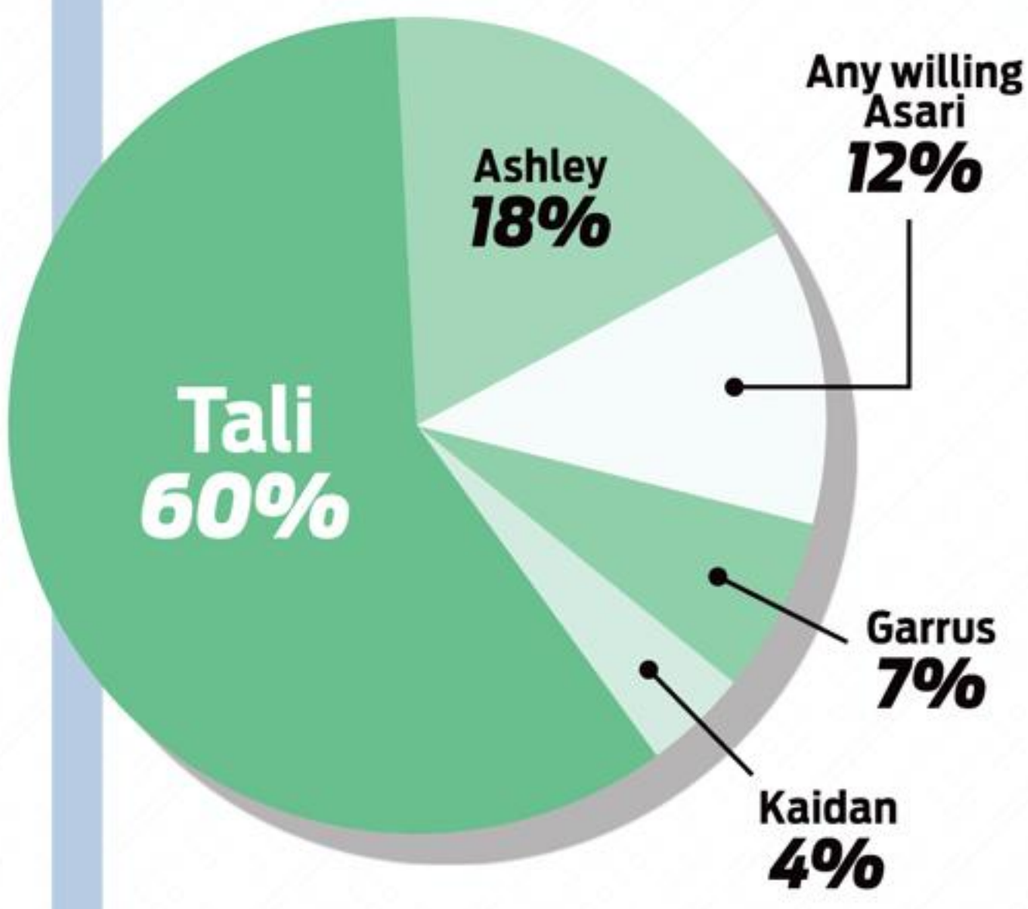
## PC GAMER POLL

### Who will you romance in Mass Effect 3?




### How could you possibly think that?

Rawr, Garrus! ***Martha Brorsson***

Tali's face. That is all I wish. ***Curtis Fox Wilson***

Unless something drastic happens, my Shepard is loyal to Liara. ***Jeffery Morton***

My FemShep doesn't have time for love. She's too busy punching out reporters and saving the galaxy from horrors beyond the rim. ***Greg Kitchin***

I'm going to romance a Thresher Maw and it will be awesome. ***Brent Hannify***

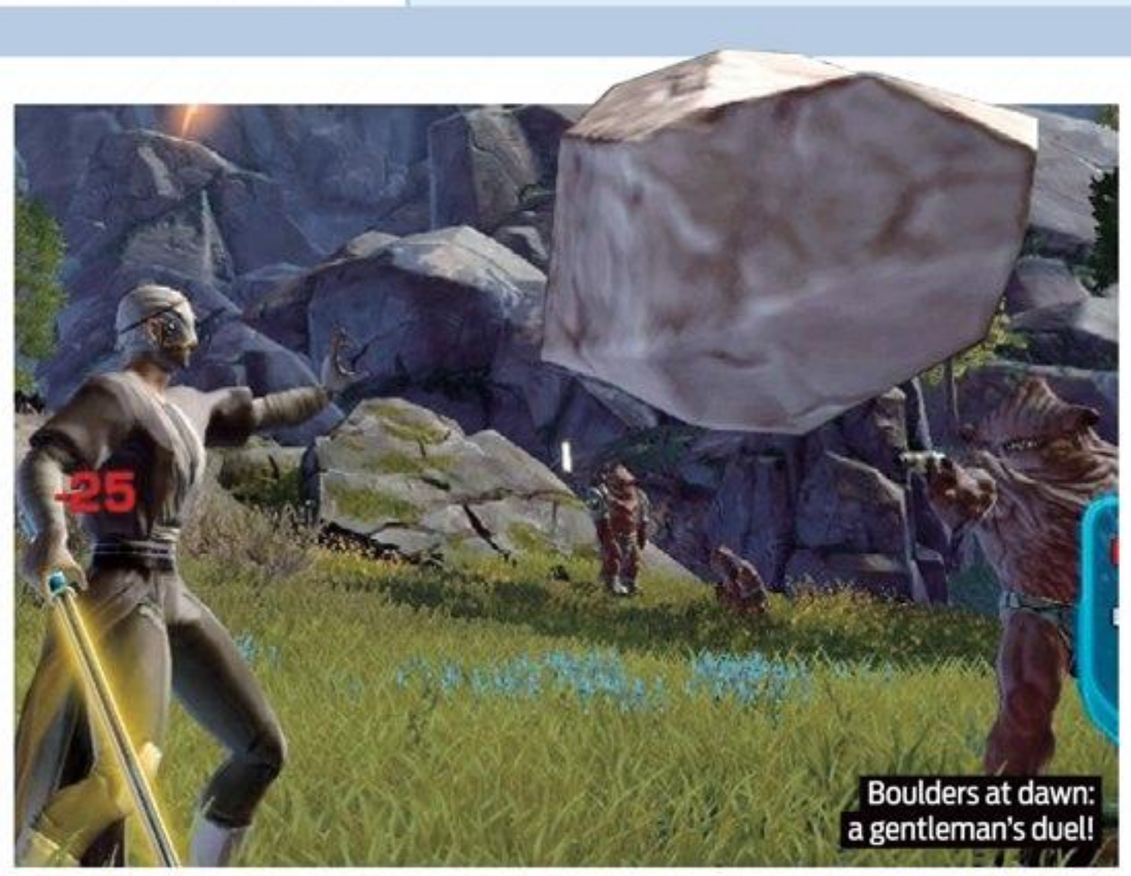
Your Mom. ***Adam James Cauwenbergs***

*Vote in the next poll on our Facebook page!*
***www.facebook.com/pcgamermagazine***

## BACK CHATTER

- I'd love a DICE sequel to *Battlefield 2142*, but come on – *MIRROR'S EDGE 2*! ***Joseph Davey***
- I don't have anything against consoles. First played *SimCity* on SNES and the PlayStation 1 introduced me to *Civilization* and *X-COM*. ***SilverMoonFlare***
- I wish *League of Legends* would take a hint from Valve and start adding some of these user-modded skins to their store. ***Powerwordhug***
- Signed up for the *Planetside 2* beta! Loved the original's teamwork, coordination and very cool raids. ***Bill Zodanga***
- *The Binding of Isaac* grosses me out at times. Hopefully, the DLC will make it even more disturbing. ***Leepcool***
- Remedy is self-publishing *Alan Wake* on Steam! Hopefully the port will be good. ***Gergely Buránszki***

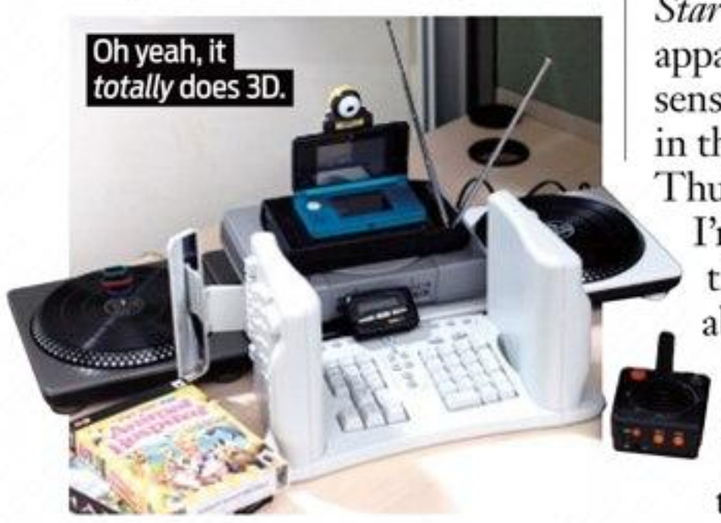
*gamers are...we love being contrarian. It's like how no one talks about how good* The Dark Knight *is anymore, but instead about whether or not subsequent superhero flicks will be better. It's unnecessary to think we can't have two good things without one being "dethroned," but perhaps competition just runs in geek blood. Wanna fight about it?* ***PCG***


Boulders at dawn: a gentleman's duel!

### The hardest ware

I've been reading your magazines for a while now and I'm curious. In the reviews section, you show the requirements for the game and it got me wondering: what kind of computers do you use? Are they premade, or are they custom builds? If so, what parts do you use?
***Jonathan LeNeveu***

*We'd love to let you know, but experience tells us that describing our vastly superior hardware, purchased with our enormous game journalist salaries, will only cause bitter jealousy and serve to further separate us from the common man. We can give you a glimpse of one of our super-high-tech rigs, but we can't go into detail.* ***PCG***


Oh yeah, it *totally* does 3D.

### Rock, paper, laser

*Star Wars: The Old Republic* is apparently messing with my sense of ethics. In the preview in the January 2012 issue, Chris Thursten writes "By Level 15 I'm reliably throwing multiple rocks...and [have] the ability to give enemies a terrible migraine. This last skill doesn't feel particularly compassionate..." He then goes on to state that he doesn't use the migraine skill on sentient beings. Does this mean that it is bad to give people migraines, but it's okay to hit them in the face with a rock?
***Troy Williams***

*Fear not, this wasn't an issue of the game's Light/Dark ethics system—it was just the author stating a personal preference. Outside of* TOR, *however, the answer to your question is, YES, it is always more ethical to murder with natural weaponry instead of otherworldly tech and abilities. Kill someone with a spear and at least you can argue your case in court, but if you start executing people with mind bullets, look forward to being the subject of an FBI manhunt.* ***PCG***

## WHERE WE PLAY

Fight alongside us on the *PC Gamer* community servers

***CS: Source***
75.102.38.129:27016

***Team Fortress 2***
8.17.251.163:27015

***Arma 2: OA***
75.102.38.3:2332

***GoldenEye: Source***
75.102.39.88:27015

Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, *PCG*'s staff-approved hosting service. Visit ***artofwarcentral.com***

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"...should provide a deep, satisfying experience"
- GameFront

"The pause-and-go system is an exciting innovation..."
- PC Gamer

GamingExcellence BEST OF E3 2011 NOMINEE

EDITORS' CHOICE E3 GAMESPOT 2011 NOMINEE

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MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Violence

coreplay

bitComposer GAMES

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Games for Windows

# MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

# Light and dark

## The highest highs and lowest lows of **STAR WARS** games *by Tyler Wilde*

Beneath its shiny MMO wrapper, *The Old Republic* is a concentrated bar of scrumptious BioWare RPG, and I plan to eat it up until I puke Klatooine paddy frog all over the side of my hoverbike. But my gastronomic gameplay style aside, we gave *TOR* a 93% in our last issue (March 2012)—the third highest score we've ever awarded a *Star Wars* game. That's the kind of quality we expect from BioWare RPGs, but from *Star Wars* games?

That's a more turbulent story. Chunks of *Star Wars* have been ripped from the flesh of its double-trilogy and mushed into just about everything that can be sold. The pastoral PC gaming landscape alone is scattered with over 50 *Star Wars* games and expansions, and such a prolific franchise couldn't be without a few toxic swamps. With *TOR* on our minds, we opened the vault where the *PC Gamer* review database is kept for a look back at the best and worst *Star Wars* games we've ever judged.

### Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast

PC GAMER 96

**Released** 2002

**What We Said** "If you can make it through the uninspired first third, you'll be treated to one of the prettiest, coolest, most compelling shooters released in the past year." (June 2002)

**Play It Now** $10 on Steam

### Clone Wars Adventures

PC GAMER 54

**Released** 2010

**What We Said** "...the stinkers that Sony Online's lumped into the package to try to justify a six-dollar monthly fee end up lowering the overall value rather than elevating it." (Holiday 2012)

**Play It Now**

www.clonewarsadventures.com

### Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

PC GAMER 91

**Released** 2003

**What We Said** "Its plot is arguably more satisfying than the ham-fisted narratives of the recent *Star Wars* films... BioWare won't need Force Persuade to make gamers love this exceptional RPG." (Feb. 2004)

**Play It Now** $10 on Steam

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## Star Wars: Battle for Naboo

PC GAMER 15

**Released** 2001

**What We Said** "The graphics look like something a five-year-old drew for the kitchen fridge... *Naboo* quite simply sucks eggs." (May 2001)

**Looking Back** We've suffered so many bad console ports that we're becoming numb to the insult, but perhaps the wound was fresher ten years ago when Steve Klett called this N64-to-PC disaster "one of the saddest excuses for a licensed game to hit the PC in quite a while."

**Play It Now** The demo still lives on a few download sites out there, but don't expect it to run on a modern PC. Also, don't bother.

## Star Wars: Force Commander

PC GAMER 47

**Released** 2000

**What We Said** "Time and again I found units stuck to walls, waltzing in circles, or simply moonwalking in a futile attempt to breach uncrossable terrain." (June 2000)

**Play It Now** Used copies are still being sold on Amazon.

## Star Wars: Dark Forces II

PC GAMER 94

**Released** 1997

**What We Said** "LucasArts has pushed the boundaries of 3D gaming way back with this one... all-round, the best 3D action game to date." (Dec. 1997)

**Play It Now** $5 on Steam

## Star Wars: The Clone Wars – Republic Heroes

PC GAMER 43

**Released** 2009

**What We Said** "One of the first things that'll strike you...[is that] this game looks like it was made for the PlayStation 2. The second thing: the palm of your hand hitting your face after suffering through the gameplay." (Jan. 2000)

**Play It Now** $20 on Steam

## Star Wars: TIE Fighter

PC GAMER 96

**Released** 1994

**What We Said** "If I were stuck on a desert island (with electricity and a PC) and could have only one game to play, I'd choose *TIE Fighter*." (Oct. 1994)

**Looking Back** We didn't review *Star Wars: X-Wing*, which released the year before *PC Gamer* launched in the US, but in 1994 *TIE Fighter* received the highest score we'd ever given at the time, and few games have scored higher since. It might not make our desert island lists today, but it remains one of our favorite space sims.

**Play It Now** *TIE Fighter* is being distributed on the web as abandonware, which LucasArts doesn't appear to either condone or condemn. To keep it legit, you *can* find used copies on Amazon. You do have a floppy drive, right?

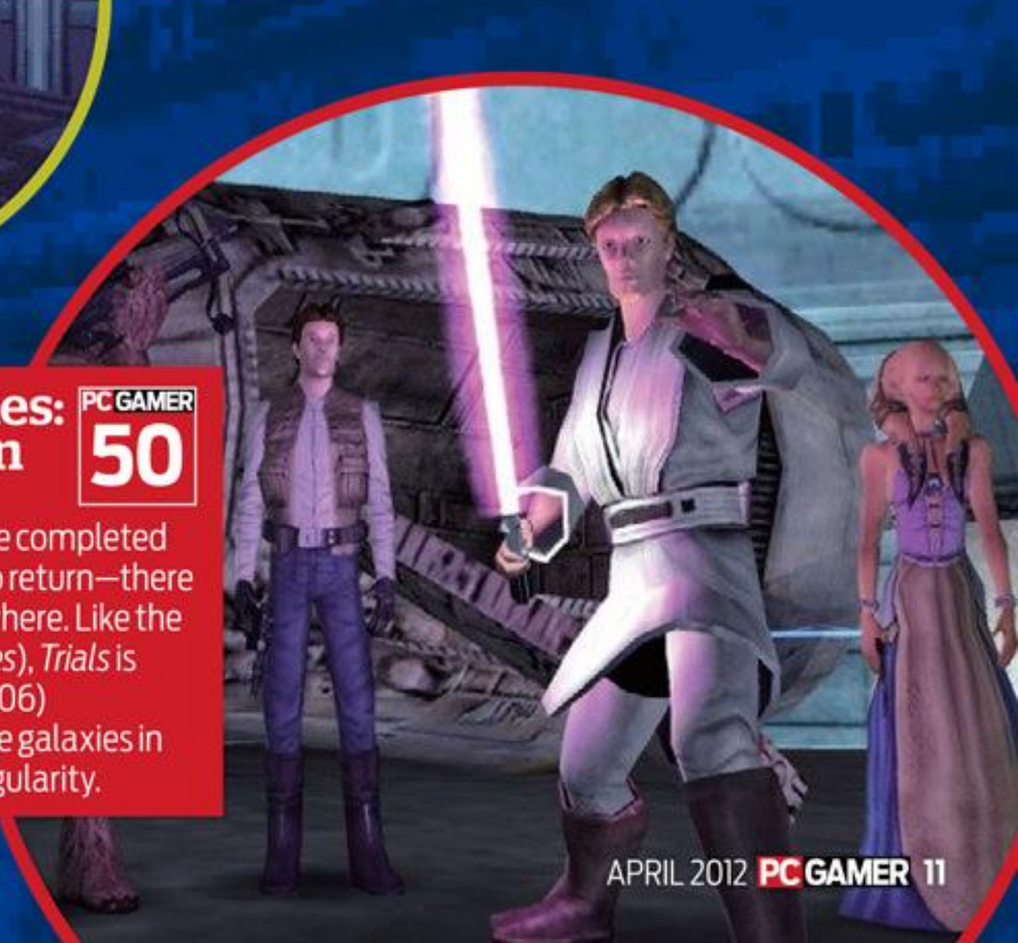
## Star Wars Dark Forces

PC GAMER 92

**Released** 1995

**What We Said** "In *Dark Forces*, you can duck, jump, and look up and down—none of which were possible in *Doom*...It's easily the best first-person shooter since." (May 1995)

**Play It Now** $5 on Steam



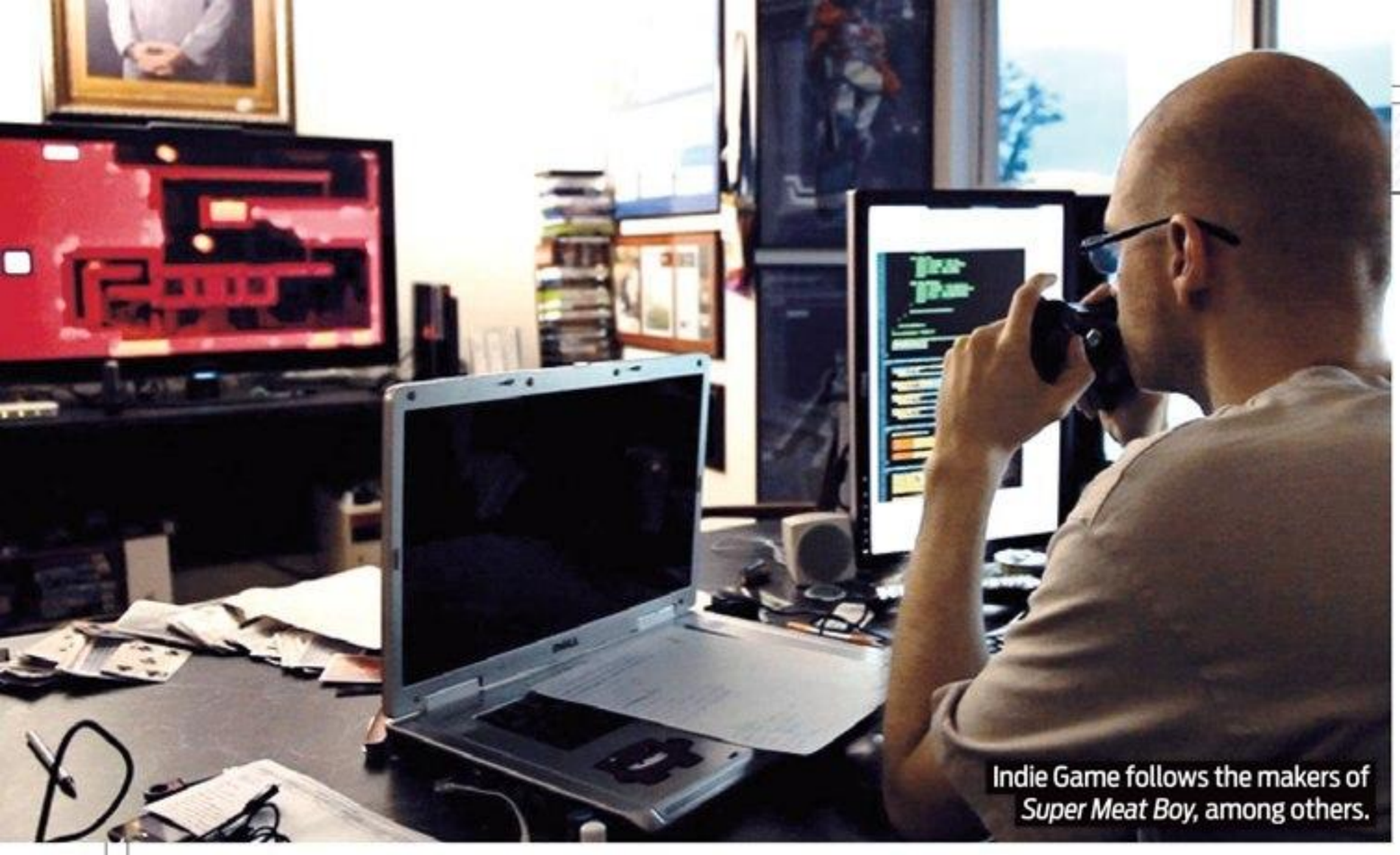
## Star Wars Galaxies: Trials of Obi-Wan

PC GAMER 50

**Released** 2005

**What We Said** "Once you've completed the trials, there's no reason to return—there are safer hunting areas elsewhere. Like the previous expansion (*Wookiees*), *Trials* is disposable content." (Jan. 2006)

**Play It Now** Impossible—the galaxies in question collapsed into a singularity.



Indie Game follows the makers of *Super Meat Boy*, among others.

# Indie Game: The Movie: the TV series

## HBO bags the rights to bring indie developers to the small screen

*Indie Game: The Movie* has been picked out of the Sundance Film Festival for an adaptation by HBO, the TV network that gave us *The Sopranos*, *Game of Thrones* and *Deadwood*.

The film is a 90-minute documentary following the developers behind *Super Meat Boy*, *Braid*, and the currently Xbox-exclusive *FEZ*. It's an exploration of the personal side of making a game, from inspiration to hardship, public exposure and (hopefully) acceptance and success.

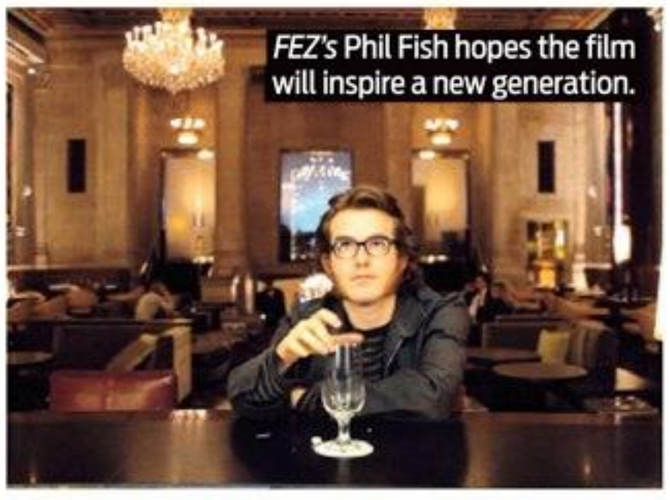
The TV series, however, won't feature real developers—it's being described by creators James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot as a 30-minute fictional show that's loosely based on the movie.

Producer Scott Rudin's resumé includes Facebook movie *The Social Network*, the Coen brothers' remake of *True Grit*, and baseball biopic *Moneyball*. Considering his past work, it's likely that it was the human element of *Indie Game: The Movie* that attracted Rudin's interest. With that in mind, it's unlikely that this will be the indie games sitcom that some commentators feared it might be. In other words, you won't be seeing Larry David as Jonathan Blow any time soon.

*Indie Game: The Movie* premiered at Sundance in January, taking home the award for Best Editing in the World Cinema Documentary category. The movie's success wouldn't have been possible without the support of the gaming community, which donated over $90,000 in 72 hours over the course of two Kickstarter campaigns. That groundswell of support is what allowed *Indie Game: The Movie* to go on to garner critical acclaim and the interest of HBO.

It's hopefully a sign that games and the people who make them are on track to receive more thorough, thoughtful exposure in the mainstream media. As long as the end result doesn't resemble *The Big Bang Theory*, we'd gladly give this a watch. ■ ***Chris Thursten***

Fingers crossed for a PC version of *FEZ*.



*FEZ*'s Phil Fish hopes the film will inspire a new generation.

## SEGA SPINS OFF

**INDUSTRY** TOTAL WAR PUBLISHERS LAUNCH NEW STUDIO

Sega has opened a new studio in the UK called Hardlight. They'll focus on "creating high quality, innovative game experiences for both current and future platforms." Given Sega's love for all things PC gaming, we expect to see some releases from them coming soon. Apparently Hardlight have been formed from the remnants of Sega Racing Team, so maybe they'll give the nearby Codemasters studios a run for its money. **HW**

## PUNKBUSTER EXPLOITED

**BOOTING** IN *BATTLEFIELD 3*, HACKERS BAN YOU

Unscrupulous gamers have taken to using exploits to boot honest *Battlefield 3* players from servers. The hackers claim to be able to ruin not just a player's enjoyment, but also their reputation and standing, using PunkBuster. *Battlefield 3* community manager crash7800 says they're looking into it. "We definitely know that something isn't right, and we're working to fix it ASAP," he said, adding that affected players should "join servers that are not running PunkBuster." **CT**

## SAY WHAT?

THE MONTH IN QUOTABLES

"These days it's become hip to pay for indie games. That's partly down to people charging for it, like with the Humble Indie Bundle, and partly because of Steam doing awesome stuff."
**Markus "Notch" Persson**, on what's hip

"We're actually a lot more innovative within the MMO space than comparable games in other spaces like the FPS and the action genre."
**James Ohlen**, game director on *The Old Republic*, responds to critics who claim his game doesn't offer anything new

"Our job isn't just to put out a game, it's to release the next *Diablo* game. No one will remember if the game is late, only if it's great."
**Jay Wilson**, game director on *Diablo III*, announces yet another delay



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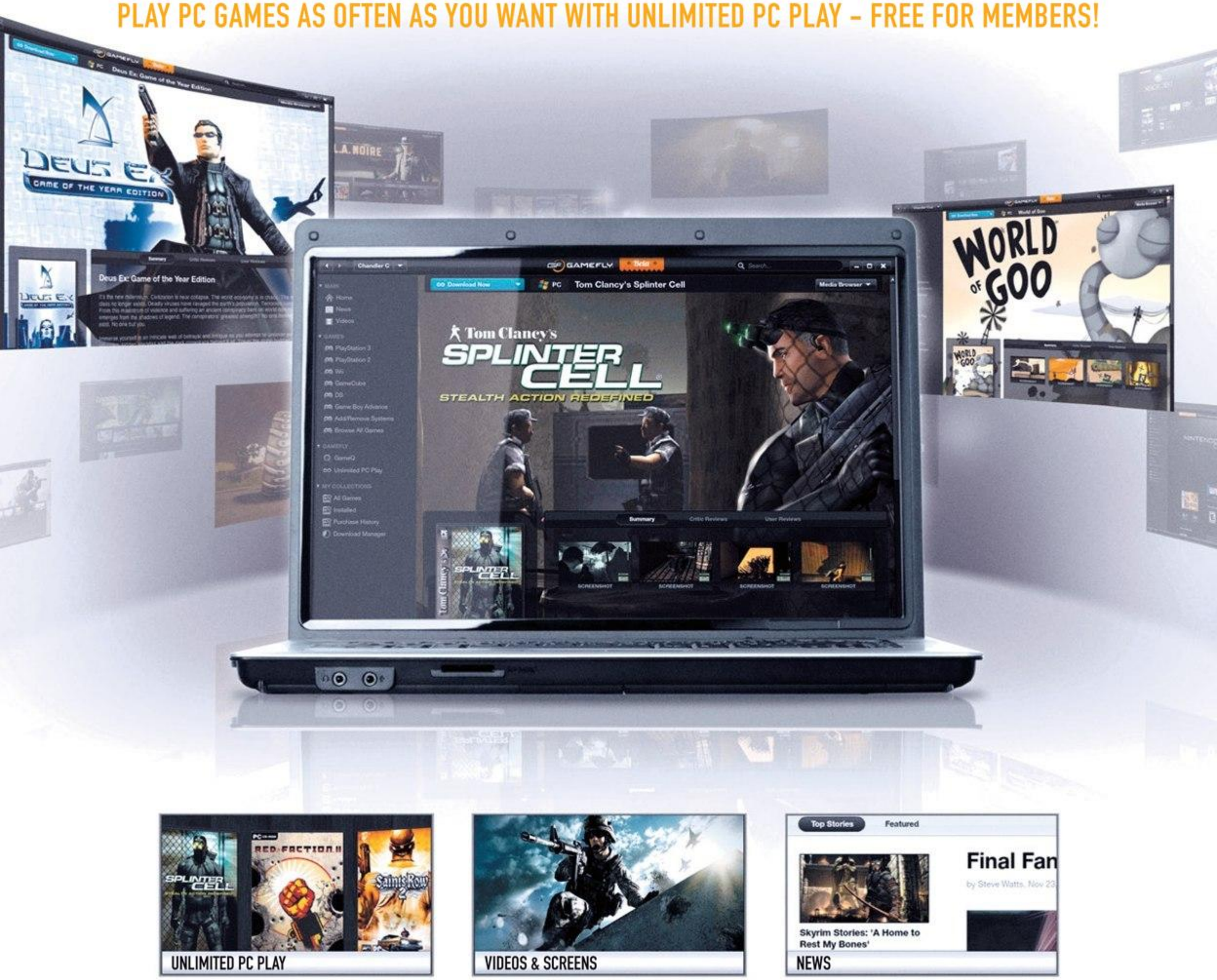











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# Gamers vs SOPA

## The gaming community rises to save the Internet from anti-piracy legislation

*Delete* is a "virtual monologue" appealing against the legislation.

The games industry has always struggled to find ways to combat piracy without punishing legitimate players. Restrictive DRM is a familiar and frustrating part of being a gamer—but it doesn't compare to the danger posed by policies recently considered by the House of Representatives.

Under the now notorious Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect Intellectual Property Act, legislators would've had the unprecedented ability to shut down any site accused of copyright infringement, blocking IP addresses and removing them from search engines. Under this regime, a funny *Battlefield* video uploaded without EA's permission could result in all of YouTube being taken down.

**"Sacrificing freedom of speech for the benefit of corporate profit is abominable and disgusting."** ***Markus "Notch" Persson***

A number of developers, including Epic Games, 38 Studios, and Trion Worlds, made their opposition to the bill public despite their membership in the pro-SOPA Entertainment Software Association. Red 5 Studios took things a step further, shutting down *Firefall*'s beta servers for a day, withdrawing from the ESA-run E3, and setting up League for Gamers, an anti-SOPA movement.

Mojang, maker of *Minecraft*, also joined in the blackouts on January 18 that included Wikipedia and Reddit. "No sane person can be for SOPA," developer Markus "Notch " Persson told *PC Gamer*. "Sacrificing freedom of speech for the benefit of corporate profit is abominable and disgusting."

Notch also took part in the Stop SOPA/PIPA Game Jam, a rapid development contest hosted by Ludum Dare. The event saw the creation of dozens of games, including Richard Perrin's heartfelt *Delete* and *Super SOPA Bros*, a Mario remake with any potentially infringing imagery replaced with a black box. All of the contest's entries can be found at *bit.ly/ludumsopa*.

The protests worked. SOPA was withdrawn in late January, with PIPA shelved shortly after. The ESA also renounced its support for the bill. The clear message sent by gamers, the games industry, and the broader internet community played a major part in achieving this result, but it's not over. Piracy still exists, and with it, the threat of authoritarian countermeasures. It's more important than ever to stay vocal about our right to a free internet. ■ ***Chris Thursten***

## DARK DEMANDS

**PORT** COMMUNITY CALLS FOR *DARK SOULS* ON PC

Console RPG *Dark Souls* is lauded for its uncompromising difficulty and novel online features, where players can scrawl messages to one another on the landscape. When a representative from publisher Namco Bandai suggested that players should self-organize if they wanted a PC version, the resulting petition passed 50,000 signatures in only three days. Hopefully we'll see its technical depth and masochistic challenge on our platform of choice. **CT**

## SMOOTH LANDING

**TECH** *X-PLANE*'S ENGINE TO AUTOPILOT REAL AIRCRAFT

Flight sim *X-Plane*'s physics model is so robust that creator Austin Meyer claims it could be used to land actual full-blown aircraft in emergencies. He's building the tech into his own custom-built plane, and will be testing it over a series of flights in the coming months. "You can have an engine failure or a pilot failure," he explains. "Hit this button, and the plane will use artificial intelligence to land itself." So easy, a child could do it. Let's hope they never have to. **CT**

## LOL OF THE MONTH

*SW:TOR*'S SAFETY DANCE

It was a sad day when BioWare squashed *Star Wars: The Old Republic*'s funniest exploit. For a time, the social animation /getdown (as opposed to /dance and its promiscuous cousin /clubdance) interrupted the wind-up on bosses' special attacks, mesmerizing them into dumbfounded vulnerability. Imbalanced, yes, but a touching reminder that violence isn't the only answer. See a video of the bug in action at *bit.ly/torgetdown*. **CT**

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# Tablets mobilize your PC gaming

## How three heavy hitters are using hardware to change the way you play

Your PC is plotting an invasion. It wants to grow. It wants to consume your living room. And some of PC gaming's biggest companies are helping it. Razer, Alienware, and Microsoft are all bringing out new slabs of PC hardware that break from the norm.

Alienware's X51 is perhaps the most traditionally PC-ish of the new living room invaders. It's a black box with green lights, but it's got a slot-loading DVD drive and is designed to sit under your TV. It is, essentially, a turbo-charged console—an Xbox 1080, years before console gamers could imagine such a thing. Compared to your big-boy PC, it's a little under hardware par—shipping with an i3, i5, or i7 processor depending on price, and bundled with a slightly puny GeForce 545 or 555 graphics card that lies flat against the motherboard—but it still blows Microsoft's console out of the technological water.

It's obviously designed to provide a step up from the console, but at just under a grand for the top-end model—compared to the 360's $200 price tag—it might seem steep for people in the market for a living room media center.

Similarly mouseless is Razer's conceptual Fiona tablet. This ridiculous beast looks like an iPad bolted to a Wii controller, dreamed up by a sentient Game Gear. Still in prototype stage, Razer has come under fire from PC gamers for the machine's silly styling. In some ways, its detractors are right: it's far too bulky a machine to carry with you. But Razer hit back, saying that it's trying to innovate in a PC market that's set in stone.

Like the X51, the Fiona would fit best in the living room as a semi-nomadic gaming device. The dual-stick system would make it ideal for action games, but with tablet-sized space to house hardware in, the visual quality could suffer. The lack of a mouse and keyboard is a problem—not because all PC derivatives need the peripherals to work, but because it's easy to see how the Fiona would be perfect for MMO players grinding out quests on the sofa, and the meager dual-stick and eight-button setup doesn't leave space for hotkeys.

Now, Microsoft's Kinect is nothing new: it's been out on Xbox 360 for more than a year. Attached to the console, it's a party game enabler; but for hackers and tinkerers on the PC, it's become a gateway to gaming's potential future. Without support, people have already used Microsoft's 3D camera to make PC games better: adding head tracking to shooters, and projecting *Doom* demons onto desks. Handed to the indie scene with the support of a willing Microsoft, the PC Kinect could, via the living room, take our gaming forward. And even if it doesn't, at least we'll finally get to play *Dance Central 2*. ■ ***Chris Thursten***



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"Amongst the SATA III drives, the Samsung 830 is the clear winner, performing significantly better than its competitors on both file copies and synthetic tests."
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MAXIMUM PC KICK ASS!

The SSD 830 Series with SATA 6Gb/s

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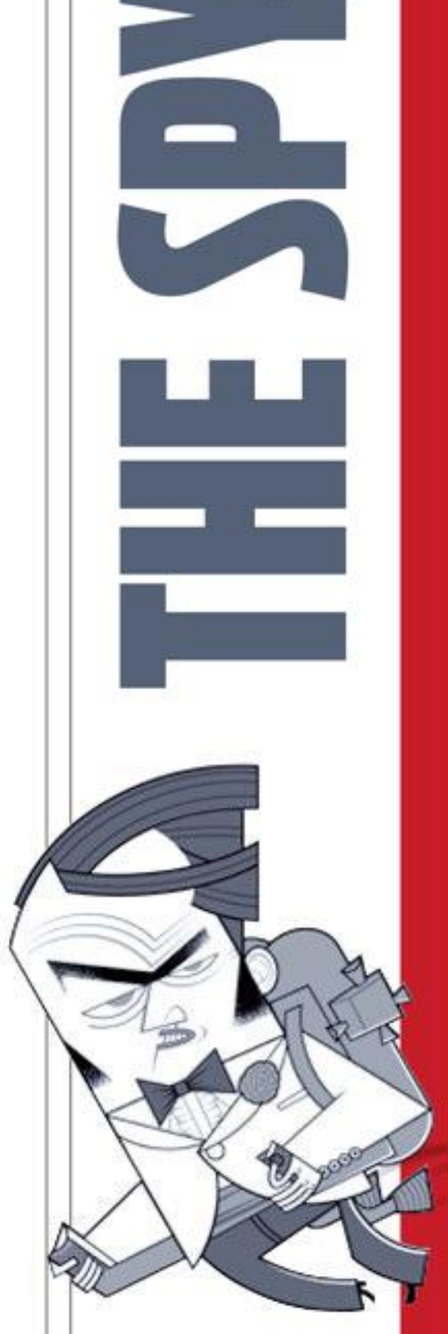
# THE SPY



**The Spy** is now on Twitter. His account name cannot be typed.

The UK retailer GAME has been one of the Spy's core sources for privileged intel since the early millennium, when it was known as The Disappointing Electronics Boutique. And it hasn't been easy. Each time it changed its security procedures, a new and more dastardly ruse was necessary. The photocopier disguise. The cardboard-cutout-of-The-Spy disguise. The cow-sized-PC-game-box disguise. Might as well retire them all—now it's just *tweeting* this stuff. "EA presentation was great," GAME's Twitter status read. "Had mentions of a new *Medal of Honour* and *Need for Speed 13*! EA have an exciting year ahead." Great. Just send that confidential information out to 33,000 followers who've never had to share a musty game box with a 350-page manual and a copy protection code sheet. The Spy quits.

With a similarly disappointing lack of secrecy, Blizzard have quietly but publicly posted a job listing for a Franchise Development Manager who will be required to "work with major consumer brands to facilitate product placement and licensing within the world of Blizzard Entertainment's next-gen MMO that enhances the gameplay experience". It was nearly three weeks before The Spy stopped vomiting.

Returning to more cautious sources, The Spy conducted some serious internet research that didn't involve just reading Reddit for six hours. The Spy knew that Activision had registered all the domain names from blackops3.com to blackops6.com. But some cybersquatter – allegedly known for his taste in hats and his ability to fit inside a turn-of-the-millennium game box – was sitting on blackops2.com. Clearly, the series would have to be canceled.

However, sources close to The Spy suggest that money may now have changed hands. Suddenly, Activision owns the blackops2.com domain name. But why now? Could this be a sign that a sequel to the *Call of Duty* spin-off is being prepared? Think, Mason, think! The domain, Mason, the domain! Why now, Mason, why now? Would it help if we electrocuted you again Mason, would it help?

Leafing through some recently acquired unmarked bills, The Spy pinged his insider trading contacts for the latest illegal tips. They advised him to invest his funds in ailing publisher THQ, whose shares now cost a frugal 67 cents each. But The Spy knew better than to bite. Via secret channels, games consultant Kevin Dent claimed that THQ's planned Warhammer 40,000 MMO, *Dark Millennium Online*, had been canceled. Secret channels? Okay, it was Twitter again.

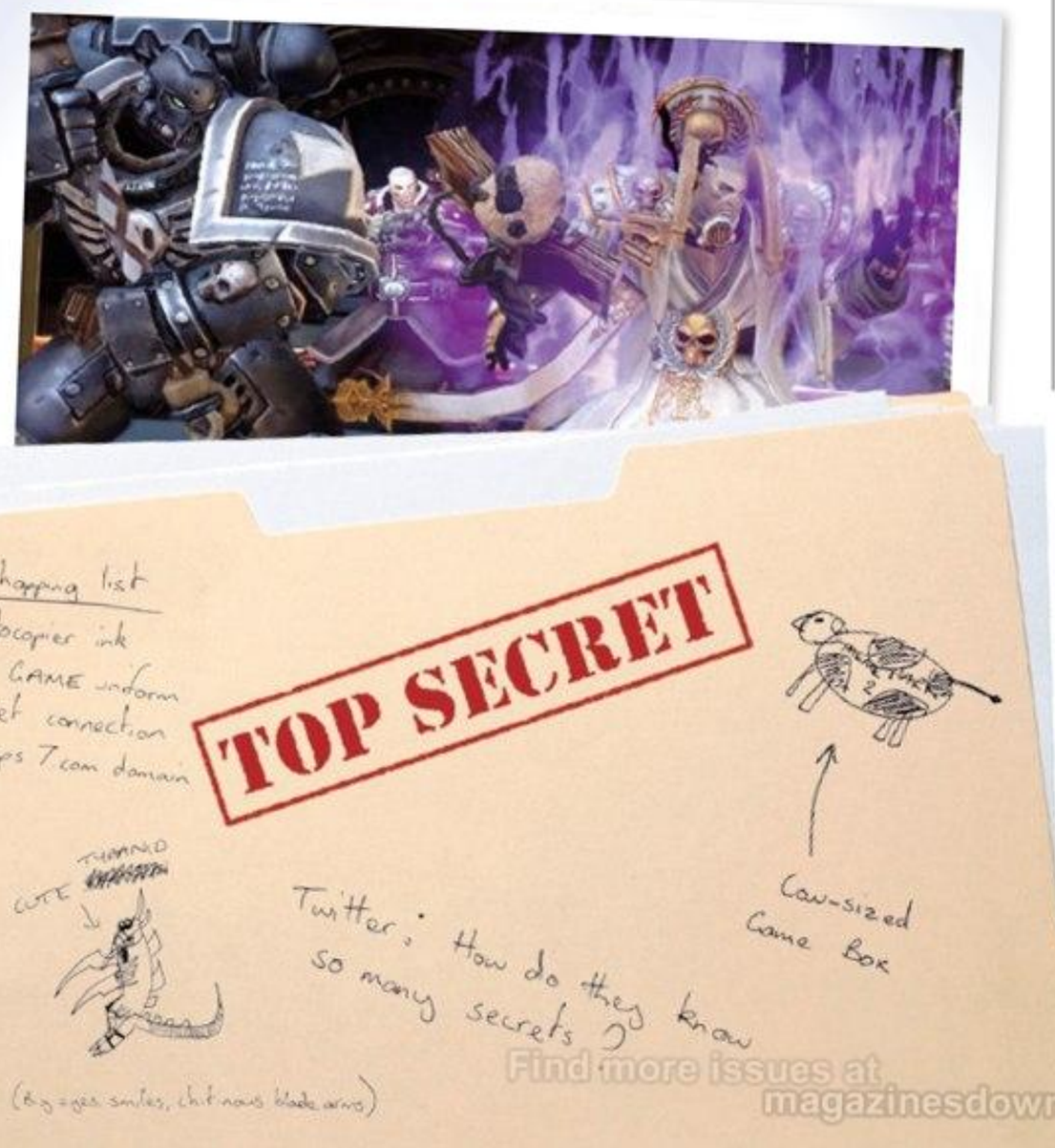
> **Is this a sign that a sequel to *Black Ops* is being prepared?**

THQ released a statement denying any decision had been made, but added ominously that "we have made decisions to ensure that the company is strategically addressing the most attractive markets." The Spy knows what this means. *Dark Millennium Online* will be rejigged to feature cute monsters engaging in exchanges over the fate of a fluffy pink bug-eyed rabbit made of glitter trapped in a space bubble. The Spy has seen the plans.

More promisingly, the Spy recently overheard a voice actor he cannot name informing Official Xbox Magazine's own deniable operative that he'd recorded lines for something called *Half-Life 2: Episode Three*. While the absurdly late conclusion of Valve's episodic experiment has been the subject of an endless stream of overexcited bad intel, this one rings true. The Spy knows Valve's working on it. The Spy knows its voice actors frequently let slip what they shouldn't. And the Lord knows it's about time.

Supporting the theory that we're due some news soon, Valve's schedule for 2012 is suspiciously clear. A company who frequently have three major projects on the go is presently working on... *Dota 2*. But its recent release of Steam for Android and iOS gives us some clues to that too: is that app really going to remain a portable chat client with a shop? As PC-centric as Valve are, they're not the kind of company to close the door on the possibility of mobile games on Steam. It's how The Spy gets in.

Satisfied, The Spy returned to his subterranean lair, eager to plan his next piece of games industry espionage. A new coded message arrived. The Spy isn't revealing what it says yet, but expect to see a full translation in the next issue of *PC Gamer*. Spy out. ■



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# Step into the endgame

It's been two months since *The Old Republic* launched and you've probably settled on which class you like best by now, and if you've quested your way up to level 50, you're ready to jump into the endgame. This is where it gets tricky—these max-level Flashpoints and Operations house the game's most difficult encounters,

Big droids carry big loot.

See map on next page

**1 THE WARM-UP**

You'll find a massive droid guarded by a few turrets here. It's not technically a boss, but it deals out enough damage to wake up your healer. It's a simple tank-and-spank, and a good test of whether or not your group has the gear and levels to take on this Flashpoint.

**2 DROID REVOLT**

The droids in Directive 7 have revolted against their owners and killed all non-Droids on the planet to kick off their anti-meatbag revolution. That means it's okay to revel in their dismemberment.

That droid definitely works out.



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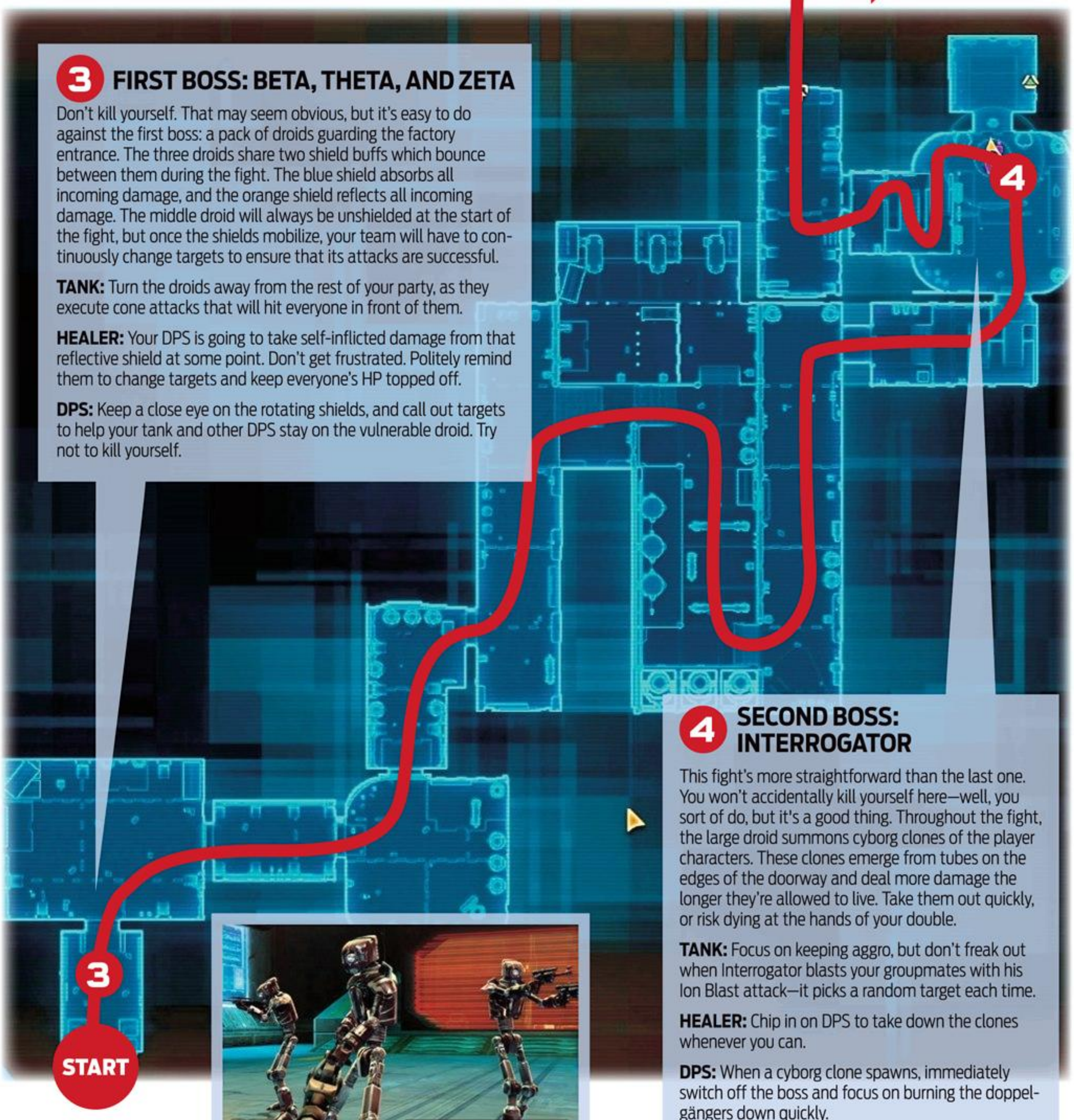
**Looking for a guild to play with?**
PC Gamer runs the Coconut Monkeys guild on The Crucible Pits server. Visit **bit.ly/CMNUwiki** to join!

# How to breeze your way through Directive 7, **THE OLD REPUBLIC**'s first level 50 Flashpoint *by Josh Augustine*

and your guild's going to need people who know the fights to lead the charge and retrieve their shiny loot. People like *you*. Directive 7 is the first four-person level-50 Flashpoint. Use this guide, complete with maps and boss strategies, to lead your guild into the endgame content with confidence.

*See map on next page*




## 3 FIRST BOSS: BETA, THETA, AND ZETA

Don't kill yourself. That may seem obvious, but it's easy to do against the first boss: a pack of droids guarding the factory entrance. The three droids share two shield buffs which bounce between them during the fight. The blue shield absorbs all incoming damage, and the orange shield reflects all incoming damage. The middle droid will always be unshielded at the start of the fight, but once the shields mobilize, your team will have to continuously change targets to ensure that its attacks are successful.

**TANK:** Turn the droids away from the rest of your party, as they execute cone attacks that will hit everyone in front of them.

**HEALER:** Your DPS is going to take self-inflicted damage from that reflective shield at some point. Don't get frustrated. Politely remind them to change targets and keep everyone's HP topped off.

**DPS:** Keep a close eye on the rotating shields, and call out targets to help your tank and other DPS stay on the vulnerable droid. Try not to kill yourself.

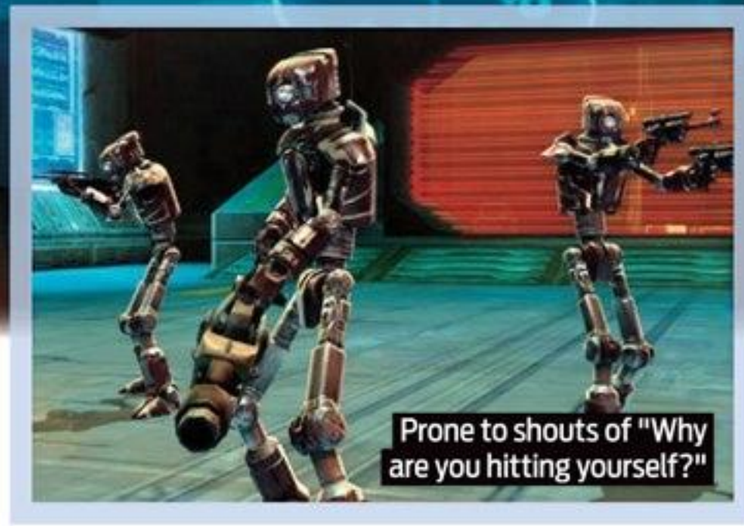
## 4 SECOND BOSS: INTERROGATOR

This fight's more straightforward than the last one. You won't accidentally kill yourself here—well, you sort of do, but it's a good thing. Throughout the fight, the large droid summons cyborg clones of the player characters. These clones emerge from tubes on the edges of the doorway and deal more damage the longer they're allowed to live. Take them out quickly, or risk dying at the hands of your double.

**TANK:** Focus on keeping aggro, but don't freak out when Interrogator blasts your groupmates with his Ion Blast attack—it picks a random target each time.

**HEALER:** Chip in on DPS to take down the clones whenever you can.

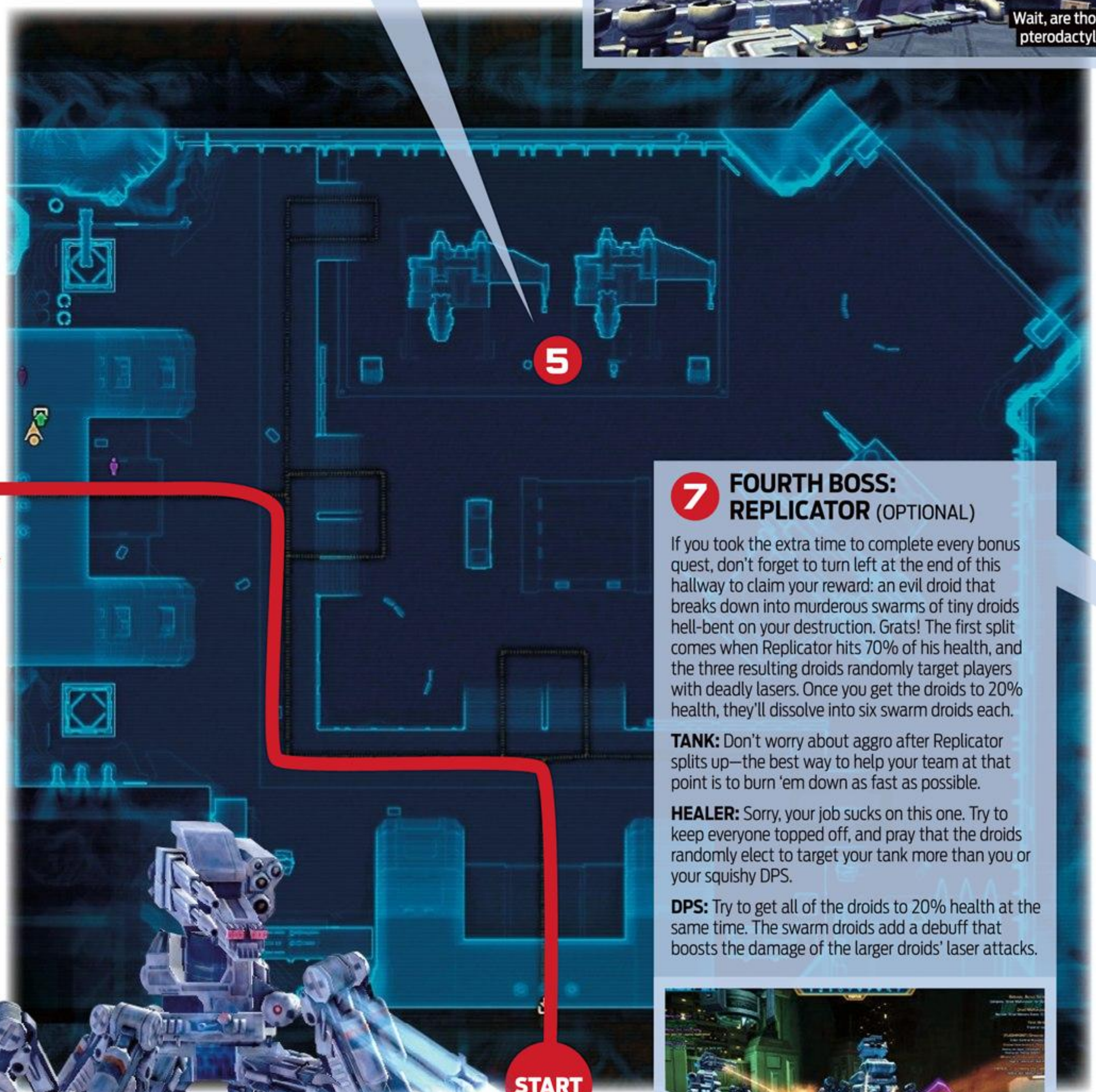
**DPS:** When a cyborg clone spawns, immediately switch off the boss and focus on burning the doppelgängers down quickly.


Prone to shouts of "Why are you hitting yourself?"

## 5 GO BIG OR GO HOME

You can skirt around the edges of this landing strip and bypass most of the enemies here if you just want to wrap up the Flashpoint and go about your business. But if you do, you'll miss out on the bonus quests, which unlock an extra boss in the final section of the map. Think of all that XP and loot you'd forfeit!

Wait, are those pterodactyls?




See map on next page

## 7 FOURTH BOSS: REPLICATOR (OPTIONAL)

If you took the extra time to complete every bonus quest, don't forget to turn left at the end of this hallway to claim your reward: an evil droid that breaks down into murderous swarms of tiny droids hell-bent on your destruction. Grats! The first split comes when Replicator hits 70% of his health, and the three resulting droids randomly target players with deadly lasers. Once you get the droids to 20% health, they'll dissolve into six swarm droids each.

**TANK:** Don't worry about aggro after Replicator splits up—the best way to help your team at that point is to burn 'em down as fast as possible.

**HEALER:** Sorry, your job sucks on this one. Try to keep everyone topped off, and pray that the droids randomly elect to target your tank more than you or your squishy DPS.

**DPS:** Try to get all of the droids to 20% health at the same time. The swarm droids add a debuff that boosts the damage of the larger droids' laser attacks.

If you see this, you're probably about to die.



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## 6 THIRD BOSS: BULWARK

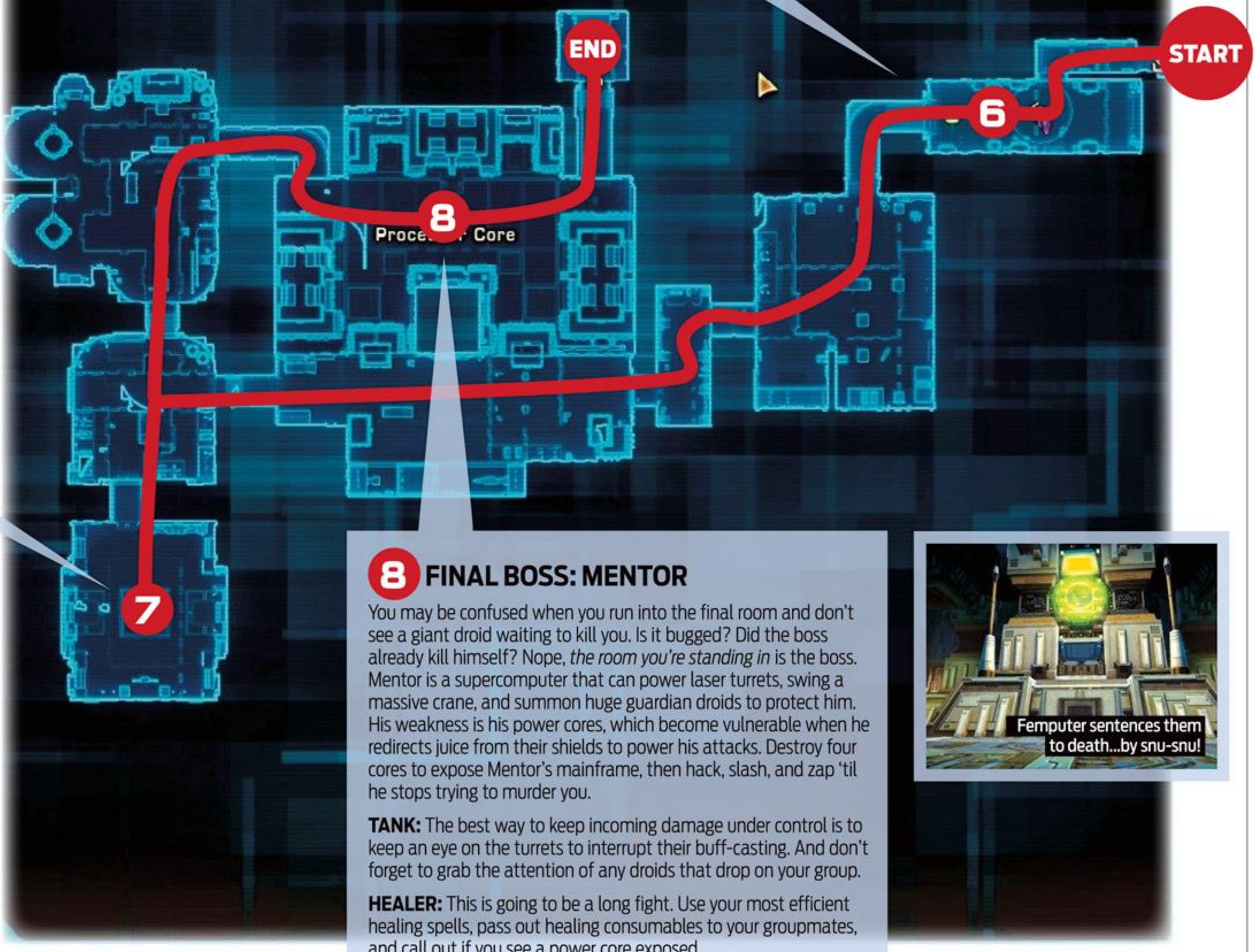
I hate this guy. He wiped my group at least 15 times before we realized how he was killing us. Shortly after the fight starts, two shield generators (the large green panels) activate on either side of him, protecting him while he melts everyone's faces. You'll need one player stationed at the base of each generator to click on the control panels and shut down the shields the second they come on. One wave of astromechs will come in to repair the shield generators—take them out and then focus on the boss.

**TANK:** Keep the boss facing the wall behind him, as his attacks will damage everyone in front of him. He will occasionally punt you and pick a new player to hit for a short while. Don't worry—he'll turn back to you quickly.

**HEALER:** Volunteer to be one of the players to shut down the shield generator. Those flaky DPS can't be trusted with the important jobs.

**DPS:** When the Interrogator switches targets off the tank, his attacks will go in a straight line to his target, hitting everyone in between. Spread out.

Forever shall I curse thy name, Bulwark the jerk.




## 8 FINAL BOSS: MENTOR

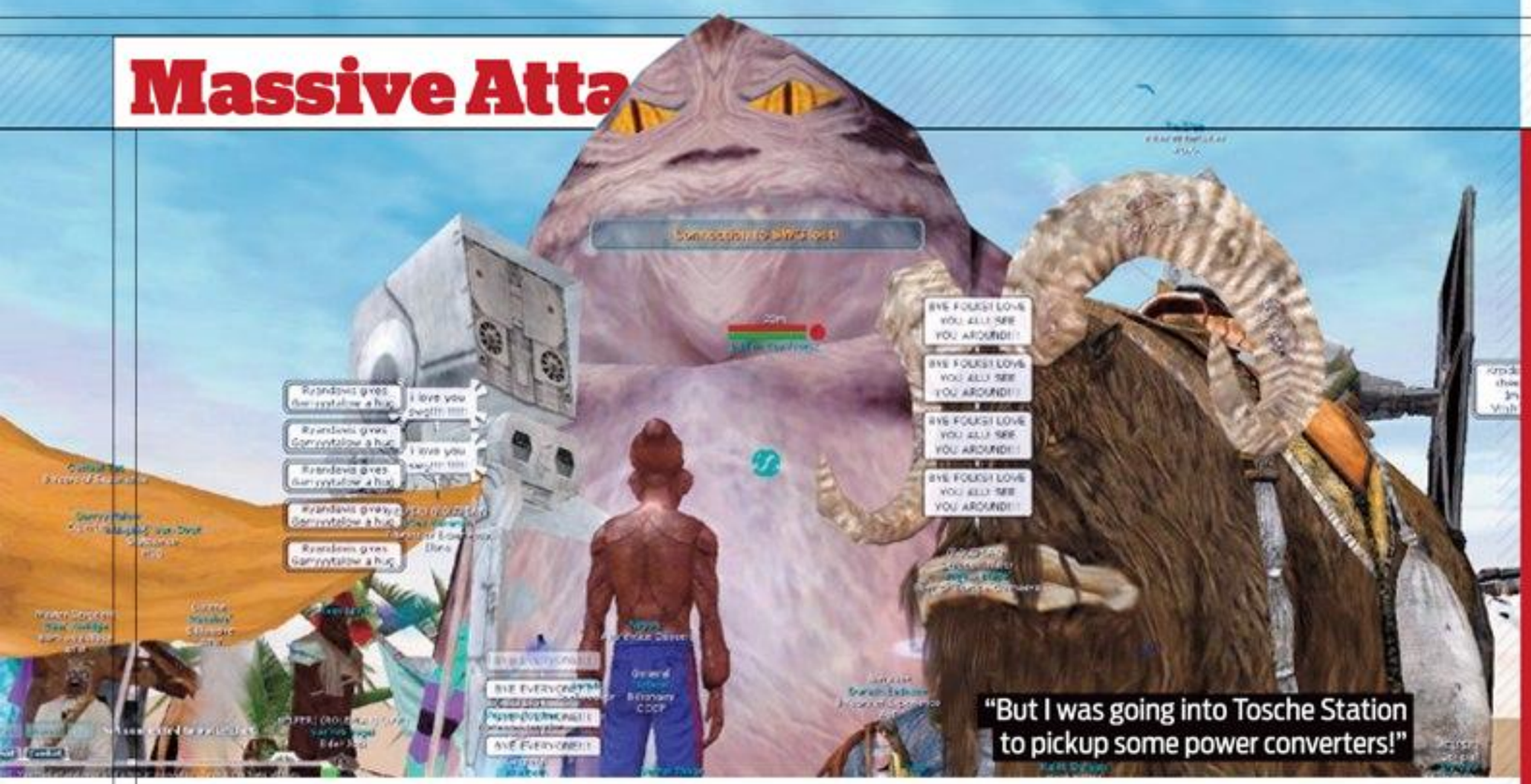
You may be confused when you run into the final room and don't see a giant droid waiting to kill you. Is it bugged? Did the boss already kill himself? Nope, *the room you're standing in* is the boss. Mentor is a supercomputer that can power laser turrets, swing a massive crane, and summon huge guardian droids to protect him. His weakness is his power cores, which become vulnerable when he redirects juice from their shields to power his attacks. Destroy four cores to expose Mentor's mainframe, then hack, slash, and zap 'til he stops trying to murder you.

**TANK:** The best way to keep incoming damage under control is to keep an eye on the turrets to interrupt their buff-casting. And don't forget to grab the attention of any droids that drop on your group.

**HEALER:** This is going to be a long fight. Use your most efficient healing spells, pass out healing consumables to your groupmates, and call out if you see a power core exposed.

**DPS:** Your highest DPS player should be solely focused on destroying power cores—taking these out is the key to winning this fight, and you're only given small windows of opportunity to attack them. The other should make killing incoming droids their priority.


Femputer sentences them to death...by snu-snu!




# MMOver

## STAR WARS GALAXIES becomes one with the Force

It's always sad when an MMO closes its doors, sending an entire virtual world into oblivion. But at least *Star Wars Galaxies*' dev team sent their galaxy off with a bang. 24 hours before calling it quits, SOE called an end to the galactic civil war and declared winners on each server, based on which side controlled more cities at the time. In honor of the Rebel or Imperial victory, X-Wings or Tie Fighters screamed over large cities doing celebratory flybys and legions of Stormtroopers or Rebel guards paraded through the streets.

But what really caught *PC Gamer*'s eye as we toured the galaxy in its final hours was the break-dancing Boba Fett, herds of hundreds of Banthas , and the 50-foot tall Ewok and purple Rancor pair that stomped around, leaving only death in their wake. After players had enough of dying repeatedly trying to defend against the carnival invasion, most mosied on over to the Sarlacc Pit to swap old war stories and embrace the armaggeddon with dancing. In those last final seconds before SOE pulled the plug, we felt the shared loss of everyone who'd called *Star Wars Galaxies* home over the last eight years. Proud of what they had created, devs and players stood side by side until the fateful "Connection to servers lost!" message appeared. ■ ***Greg Henninger***

# Cataclysmic Closes

## Not every send-off has to be a bummer

### Tabula Rasa

**Died:** February 28, 2009
In the final days of Lord British's MMOpus, players were boosted to max level and called to arms to repel a massive alien invasion. Sadly, no one survived.

### The Matrix Online

**Died:** August 1, 2009
At the big decompile, all of *MxO*'s liberated humans were given god-like power and invited to watch the canonical crumbling of The Matrix pixel by pixel.

### LEGO Universe

**Died:** January 31, 2011
We didn't get to see this finale in time for print, but if they want to keep it authentic, somebody's little brother will come in and kick down the servers.

# LEAGUE OF LEGENDS VIKTOR

## TECHNO-WIZARDRY AND YOU: HOW TO MELT FACES

**MOBA HERO OF THE MONTH**

"Run, Lucas, ruuuun! Haha, yes! Flee, you pathetic fool!" My triumphant cackle bounces around *PC Gamer*'s halls as intern Lucas Sullivan gets burnt to a crisp by my death ray. I'm talking about *League of Legends*, of course. More specifically, the first time I ever beat Lucas in a mid-lane, one on one duel—when my Viktor danced on the burnt corpse of his Ryze.

I'll always love this technological guru for giving me that gloat-worthy victory, but I'm having terrific fun with Viktor in regular matches too. Someone steps a little too close to my team's turrets? I toss down

my large, circular Gravity Field to slow them to a halt like a chubby kid in a pool of molasses, and let the pain rain down on 'em.

I love the potential harassment and damage Viktor can deal with his three area-of-effect abilities. When a full team rushes me, my force field stops all of them, giving my ultimate—a nasty electrical storm I move around independently of my champion—ample time to fry their brains.

Oh, but it's that Death Ray—that sweet, sweet laser of doom—that keeps me coming back. Click once to set where to start firing the plasma beam, and draw a quick line out to show it which direction to travel, and it melts everyone in between.

I draw lines and people die. It's simple, brutal, and incredibly addictive. ■ **JA**

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# DEV MAN TALKING

**Bryan Ekman** has been working in the game industry since 1998. He's worked on *BattleZone*, *Need For Speed*, *Transformers*, and *MechWarrior*, and represents Piranha's creative vision.

Good franchises are timeless and easily revisited generation after generation. They hold qualities—an awesome plot, deep characters, and compelling gameplay loops—which transcend shifts in pop culture, or in the case of really good ones, help define it. Developing games based on well-established franchises is the art of interpretation and evolution.

Games have made interpretations of successful franchises for decades. Most common are movie tie-ins for high profile, big-budget releases. More recently, these tended to be the worst examples of interpretations due to budget, time, and other restrictions that result in A (movie) + B (popular genre) + C (all of the best ideas from another successful game) = D (the Metacritic score).

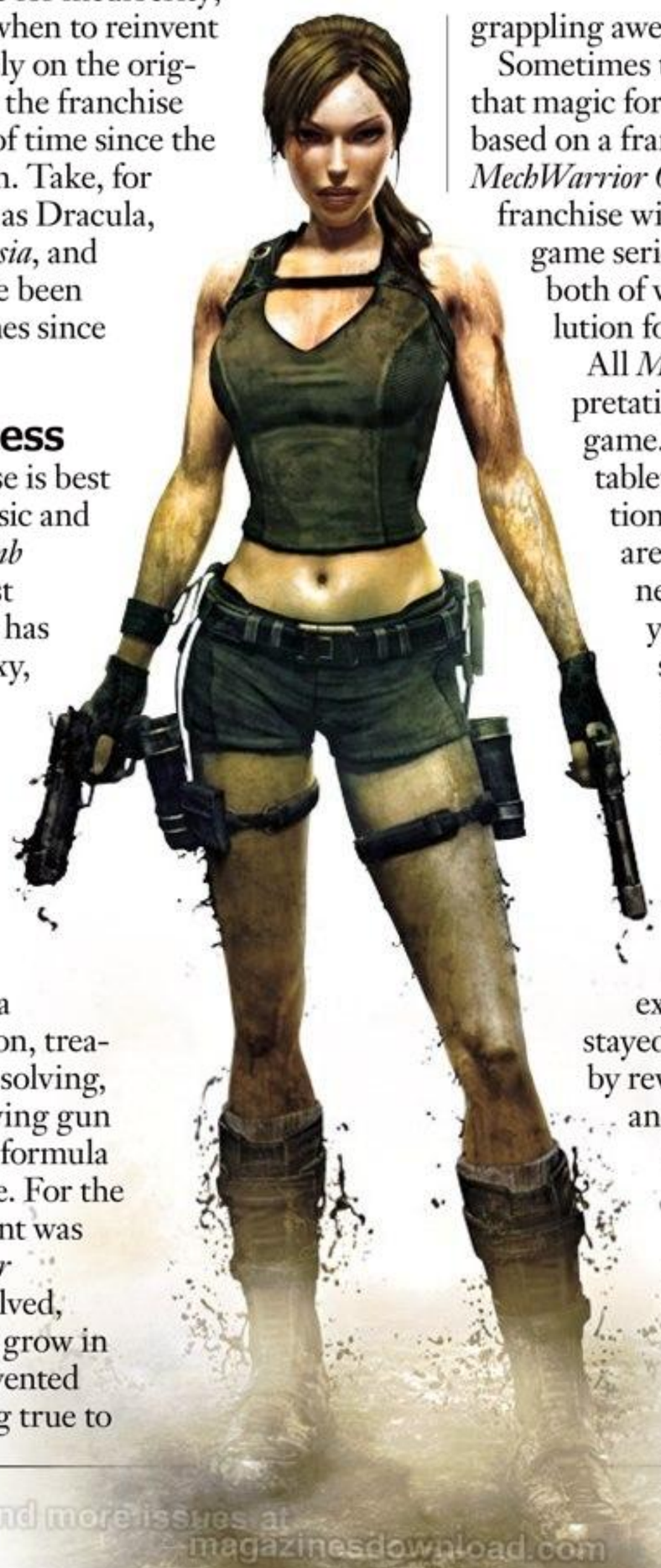
This formula is a recipe for mediocrity; understanding how and when to reinvent a franchise depends largely on the original medium from which the franchise spawned and the period of time since the original concept was born. Take, for example, such franchises as Dracula, *Tomb Raider*, *Prince of Persia*, and Batman, all of which have been reinvented numerous times since their original inception.

## Formula for success

Staying true to a franchise is best embodied by the PC classic and soon-to-be-rebooted *Tomb Raider*. Since the very first incarnation, *Tomb Raider* has featured Lara Croft, a sexy, kick-butt, dual-pistol wielding Indiana Jones-esque heroine who travels around the world on fantastical adventures to recover ancient or legendary artifacts. The core gameplay loop is simple, a combination of exploration, treasure hunting, and puzzle solving, with a nice dose of satisfying gun play. This was the magic formula that defined the franchise. For the next 16 years this blueprint was used in every *Tomb Raider* game. As technology evolved, and gamers continued to grow in skill, the developers reinvented *Tomb Raider* while staying true to its core. They understood that reinventing did not require abandoning; rather the developers embraced changes in gamer desires and demographics, changes in hardware and technology, all the while staying true to the core formula.

We can find another example in *Prince of Persia*, with its formula summed up as running, jumping, avoiding deadly traps, and ledge grabbing. When Ubisoft released *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, they adhered to the core formula while updating the franchise to give a modern audience what they wanted: gorgeous 3D graphics, fluid animation, and simple controls. All of this was accomplished while still retaining the core grappling awesomeness from the original.

> **"*Tomb Raider* was reinvented, but stayed true to its core."**



Sometimes though, devs need to stray away from that magic formula, especially when converting a game based on a franchise from another medium. If you take *MechWarrior Online* as an example, we have a game franchise with two distinct heritages. One as a video game series and one as a tabletop board game; both of which have been in constant states of evolution for over 20 years.

All *MechWarrior* games are ultimately interpretations of the classic *BattleTech* table top game. Converting the magic formula from tabletop to digital required a new interpretation and reinvention of the formula. Gone are the pages upon pages of rules and charts needed to resolve complex combat. Instead, you have modern 3D engines and physics simulators. Gone is the need to roll dice for simulated randomness, replaced instead by true player skill.

## Don't forget your fans

Lastly, you need to understand your fans, for without them, a franchise would never have been successful in the first place. *Star Trek* is a great example of a TV and film franchise that's stayed relevant for nearly 50 years. It's done so by revisiting the central themes of humanity and exploration, and then delivering these concepts in a way that appeases hardcore fans all the while embracing newcomers to the show.

This understanding of building a game for your core audience, while attracting new legions of gamers, will ultimately determine the success or failure of the franchise. ■

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# TACTICAL ADVANTAGE

Around this time last year, I was playing *Panzer General II* on a train home from visiting my family and wondering what the hell had gone so wrong with wargaming. We'd lost the ability to make good, simple, and accessible wargames. Now I find that not only do gamers have two first-rate introductory wargames to choose from, but that Matrix Games is leading the charge. That stronghold of backwards-looking, hardcore wargame design has developed a superb point of entry to the genre, and that includes its online store at www.matrixgames.com. Even serious wargamers have an easier way to get their fix.

It started with *Panzer Corps*, an updated *Panzer General II* that largely recaptured what was great about *Panzer General*. *Panzer Corps* is easy on the eyes and provides classic, hex-based wargaming without the extensive number-crunching and complicated rules that define hardcore wargaming. To be fair, it also recaptures *Panzer General*'s weak points: passive AI, and puzzle-like scenarios with trial-and-error solutions.

> **Accessibility benefits everyone, not just novices.**

Now, indie developer 2x2 Games comes along with the magnificent *Unity of Command* (a hardcore Eastern Front game masquerading as an introductory-level wargame). It's the best Sid Meier design in years, which is only awkward because Sid Meier didn't make it.

*Unity of Command* is a triumph of game design, embodying the unique ability of great strategy games to explain complex, unwieldy subjects in light of a couple crucial factors. It throws out much of the "clash of the titans" mythology of the Eastern Front in favor of a more grounded focus on supply and transport. It's not the tactics that matter, but whether your plans will open new supply lines, or whether your units have rested long enough for another push on Stalingrad. Its core concepts take only a few minutes of tinkering to understand, but the game continues to find new ways to apply them and develop strategies. For instance, the Soviets must work with inferior units and can't win straight fights, so they have to starve German positions rather than rely on the breakthroughs that define the German approach.

This balance between approachability and depth is crucial if wargaming is to thrive, and developers and publishers finally seem to understand that. Matrix's Director of Product Development Erik Rutins explained that Matrix has been working hard both to improve its offerings at the intro-level and make its advanced games more accessible with improved interfaces, graphics, and tutorials. In the case of *Unity of Command*, Matrix and independent developer 2x2 Games were working to accomplish similar goals, and decided to team up. But Matrix is also directing its in-house developers to takes steps in the direction of accessibility as well.

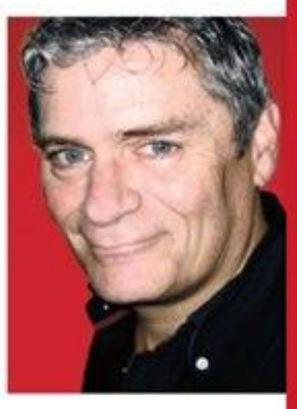
"It takes a while to turn the ship and get new games out to market, but now that they are available the results have been very good, and we feel we have a much better entry point in our catalog," says Rutins. "We have also been working to expand the availability of these kinds of games beyond the PC platform as part of the same strategy, as we feel there is a much larger potential market for these [games] when they are designed with the general gamer in mind."

It's great to see indies like 2x2 and a publisher like Matrix, the last major wargame publisher standing, taking the right steps to expand the hobby. Accessibility benefits everyone, not just novices. Wargames have too long been trapped by old design conventions, entombing enjoyable gameplay beneath mountains of marginally important data that only obscures what players really need to know. A game like *Unity of Command* may not be quite as realistic or sophisticated as a monster wargame like *War in the East*, but it does demonstrate that you can make the best aspects of hardcore wargaming available to a new audience without resorting to huge manuals and lengthy tutorials. It should also make everyone working and playing in this genre ask how much the quest for "down to the last belt buckle" realism has really improved the hobby, and what it has cost. ■

The Germans attempt to stem the Russian onslaught at Third Kharkov in *Unity of Command*.

**Rob Zacny** hosts the Three Moves Ahead strategy podcast. This month he's been obsessed with *Unity of Command* and *The Witcher*, and disappointed by *Arkham City*.

# SIMULATION



**Andy Mahood** decided to go retro this month with *rFactor* (*Historic GT & Touring Cars* mod), *C.A.R.S.* (Open Beta), *Rise of Flight*, *FlightSim X* (with A2A's *Captain of the Ship* add-on) and *IL-2 Sturmovik: Cliffs of Dover*.

"They just don't make 'em like that anymore."

If that sums up your philosophy on cars (and other things mechanical) then the HistorX modding team has your race sim ready. *Historic GT & Touring Cars* is the group's latest mega-mod for ISI's *rFactor* and this ambitious add-on will plant a perma-grin on the faces of all classic car fans.

Featuring over 100 cars (and 750 liveries) from twenty-four different manufacturers—ranging from nimble Alfas and Loti to powerful Panteras and Ferraris—*Historic GT & Touring Cars* 1.90 boasts enough vehicular variety to keep you motoring for months. Although freeware, the mod does require an installed version of *rFactor* to piggyback on to (you can grab an *rFactor Lite* installer at ISI's rfactor.net website) as well as a legal copy of SimBin's *GT Legends*.

If you don't already own *GTL*, the PDF manual provides a link to www.raceroom.net where you can download a copy for 10 euros (about $13). Better yet, you don't even have to load the sim (or its evil Starforce protection) because the *HGT&TC* mod only checks for the presence of the legally purchased game; it won't ask you to install it. The mod doesn't supply any tracks but a visit to www.rfactorcentral.com—and its repository of over 1100 freeware race circuits from around the world—can quickly rectify that.

After jumping through these early setup hoops, you end up with a completely overhauled version of *GT Legends*, one of the highest rated racing sims ever reviewed in these pages (93%, January 2006). However, with triple the car count, totally revamped physics, and an all new GUI, *Historic GT & Touring Cars* delivers a refreshingly different driving experience (albeit a driving experience that cries out for the proper controller hardware). Although you can use a gamepad or joystick, *HGT&TC* doesn't come into its own until you mate it to a proper force-feedback steering wheel and pedal setup. This isn't just because of the challenging, scratch-built driving physics either. The add-on also includes TechAde's *RealFeel* FFB plugin to improve force-feedback effects as well as Richard Jackett's nifty *Grinding Tranny* mod that detects and penalizes clumsy gear changes with appropriate grinding sounds and missed shifts.

My first experience with the mod entailed a few laps around Monza in a 1.6-liter Lotus-Cortina. The boxy yet sprightly little sedan was a handful over the high curbs but I had an absolute blast squeezing every MPH I could out of the hopped-up 1965 econobox. Graduating to a 400-HP, 3.5-liter BMW CSL Schnitzer pushed the learning curve a little too fast and I found myself rearranging a number of Armco barriers when the stiffly sprung German road-rocket broke traction in some unexpected places. Before you even get to the game's engaging wheel-to-wheel single-player and online racing contests the mod will challenge you to transmit hundreds of unrestricted horsepower to the asphalt while gripping an uncooperative bucking-bronco steering wheel over every strip of track.

> **"This mod will plant a perma-grin on classic car fans."**

This sense of adventure changes with every car you roll out of the pits. The '72 Ferrari Dino 246GTS scared the living bejesus out of me the first time I slid it into an opposite lock tank-slapper through the Nordschleife's high-speed Flugplatz corner while the Porsche 906 and Ford GT 40 prototypes demanded huge doses of respect before I could even begin to tap into their factory-backed awesomeness.

Like most sim fans, I can't wait for ISI's highly anticipated *rFactor 2.0* to hit retail channels later this year. But, thanks to the *Historic GT & Touring Cars* mod, at least I have an enormous stable of classic racing machines to entertain me while I wait. ■

Classic racers will test your sim-driving prowess at every turn.



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Life is full of little lessons that, once learned, spawn mantras. Failing to appreciate something of value and losing it while pursuing a shinier prize led to the expression "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Trying to rationally respond to message board zealots begat "he who lies with dogs, rises with fleas." Wizards of the Coast's disastrously ill-conceived *4th Edition of Dungeons & Dragons* shall henceforth be known as "only dolts try to turn a tabletop roleplaying game into *World of Warcraft*."

D&D created the RPG genre by offering a playground for imagination. Players could create an alter-ego and live a virtual life of their own choosing, doing whatever they wanted and experiencing the consequences of those choices. While *D&D* had its roots in wargaming, it exploded in popularity by offering personalized roleplaying experiences.

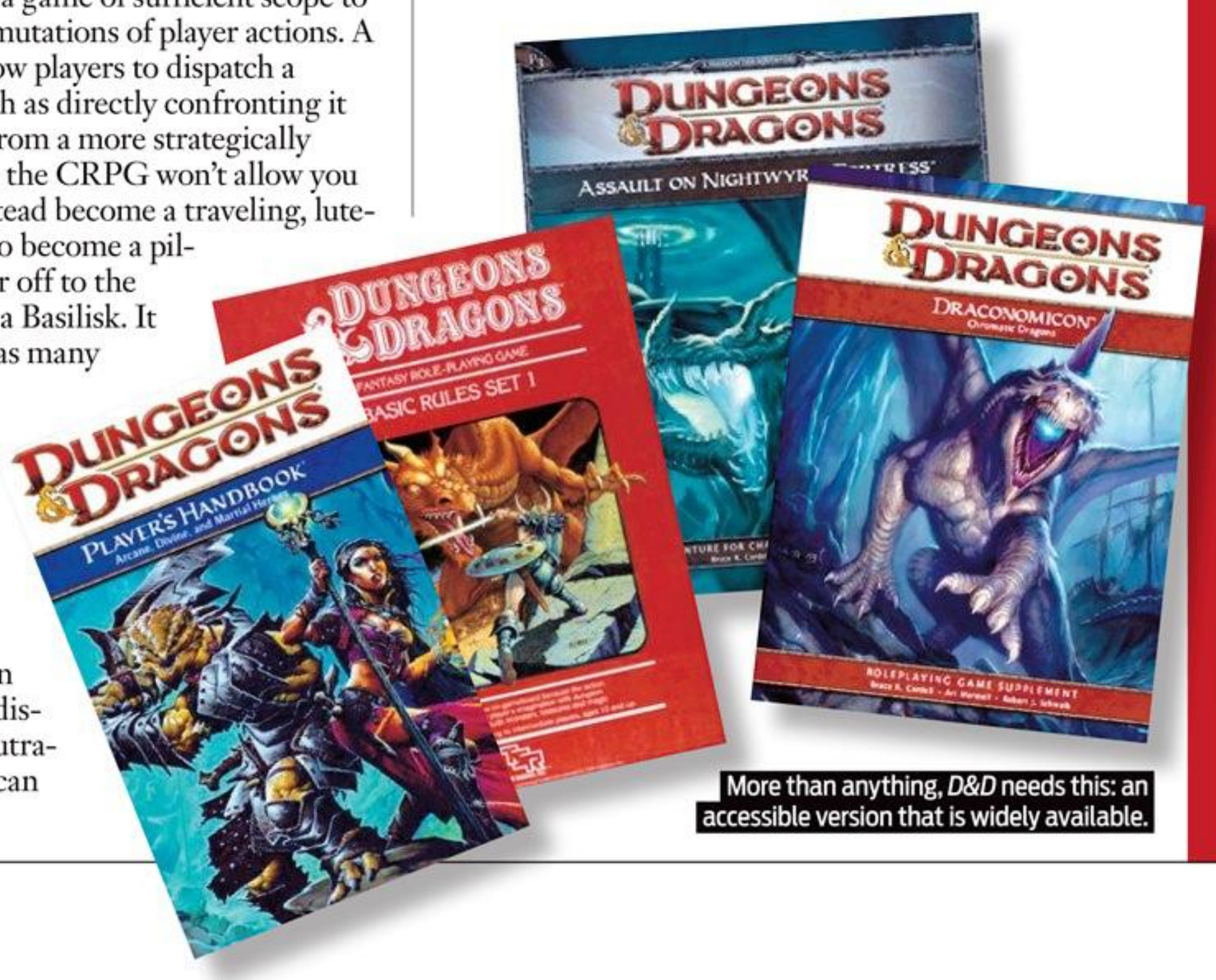
> **"Only dolts turn a tabletop game into *World of Warcraft*."**

That sort of freedom can never be matched by a computer role-playing game (CRPG). It would be foolhardy to even attempt to develop a game of sufficient scope to respond to all possible permutations of player actions. A good RPG game could allow players to dispatch a dragon in several ways, such as directly confronting it in its lair or ambushing it from a more strategically advantageous location. But the CRPG won't allow you to abandon the hunt to instead become a traveling, lute-laden bard, or head to sea to become a pillaging pirate, or just bugger off to the astral plane for a date with a Basilisk. It can't accommodate nearly as many creative solutions to your dragon problem, either, such as causing a cave-in to entomb it, or poisoning its food supply, or the ever-popular deflowering all virginal bait in the vicinity. A human dungeon master can respond to, and reward or discourage, any cunning or outrageous scheme that players can concoct.

CRPGs can't offer such roleplaying freedom, but they can simulate combat in detail since PCs are darn good at crunching numbers and tracking details that are painful to manually calculate. CRPGs emphasize combat, and have evolved their mechanics out of necessity and to take advantage of the strengths of the medium. Yet WotC foolishly imported ill-suited PC gaming mechanics into *4th Edition D&D* as if they were the reason tabletop RPGs have been eclipsed in popularity. Manually recording the acquisition and use of dozens of feats and abilities, enduring effects and conditions is arduous. It slows *4th Edition D&D* to a crawl and makes combat almost the sole focus of any session. *4th Edition D&D* emphasizes the aspects that tabletop RPGs do poorly compared to CRPGs, and diminishes their sole strength: roleplaying freedom.

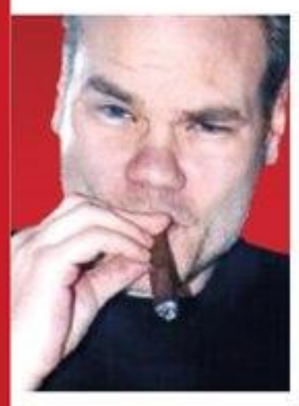
WotC is trying to take a mulligan and has announced *5th Edition D&D*. The return of *3rd Edition* designer Monte Cook and the announced modular design approach are promising. *D&D* should be an accessible core game that allows players to incorporate additional complexity where desired. It needs to emphasize roleplaying freedom, instead of being a gladiatorial arena for character builds. It should be set in a well-developed world with an overall theme, such as the Forgotten Realms facing a Sauron-type threat. WotC could evolve the world and tell a story over time through adventure modules, giving players ongoing purpose and a sense that they're participating in something bigger.

Tabletop *D&D* will never be as popular as PC gaming, but it should be able to compete with *Monopoly* for shelf space. *D&D* can offer open-ended adventures and worlds with unparalleled nonlinearity, with story-telling possibilities and memorable characters that can easily surpass any CRPG, and that's what it needs to do, or it will continue to struggle to retain its audience and gain new players. ■




More than anything, *D&D* needs this: an accessible version that is widely available.

## ALTERNATE LIVES



**Desslock** is still reading tomes in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, prepping for the *Mass Effect* conclusion, signing petitions for a PC port of *Dark Souls*, and trying to get Geralt a new girlfriend in *Witcher 2*.

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# XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

**FIRST LOOK** Can Firaxis make *XCOM* the game its fans deserve?

Jake Solomon, lead designer for Firaxis, really loves *X-COM*. This isn't as notable as how badly Firaxis wants you to *know* that he really loves *X-COM*. It's not just Solomon either. Everyone at Firaxis loves the game, I'm told. If someone joins the team and hasn't played it, then playing it is their first task at the company. I'm reminded repeatedly that the original game was published by MicroProse Software, and that Firaxis was born from the ruins of that company.

You can forgive their anxiety. When 2K Marin's new *XCOM* was announced in 2010, the internet shook with frustration. 16 years after the Gollop brothers' turn-based masterpiece was released, the series was returning—as a first-person shooter. It wasn't what fans wanted.

*This* is what you wanted. Later this year, Earth's Extraterrestrial Combat Unit will return. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* is part remake of the 1994 original, and part sequel. It's developed by the company that created *Civilization*, under the stewardship of Creative Director Sid Meier. It's turn-based. It has destructible environments. It has the Geoscape. It has the Skyranger. It has soldiers with tweakable stats. And I'm just about to see it for the first time.

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## Retcon

The screen goes black, and when it fills again I'm looking at *XCOM*'s new headquarters. "We call this the ant farm," says Jake. It's a side-on view of a vast underground base, colorful and bustling. It looks nothing like anything in the original game. It looks beautiful. I can see the Skyranger in the hangar bay near the top. I can see soldiers wandering the halls, exercising, playing games in the rec room and visiting injured friends in the infirmary. "This is where the player returns after every mission."

Your headquarters are more than just for show, they're also the game's menu. Here, you can set your science team's research goals, unlocking new weapons and equipment to help your fight against the aliens.

Switch to the Barracks and the camera shoots across the base. From here you can customize your soldiers' appearance, give them names and nicknames, and manage their equipment and abilities.

Inside the Situation Room, you're faced with a shadowy figure against a glitching, TV static background. XCOM is an international organization, funded by countries around the world. If those countries are to continue giving you valuable resources, you'll need to keep them happy by occasionally bending your plans to their selfish desires. Selfish desires such as, "Please launch some satellites over our country, to keep an eye out for aliens here." and "Please stop the aliens from killing us all." They give you



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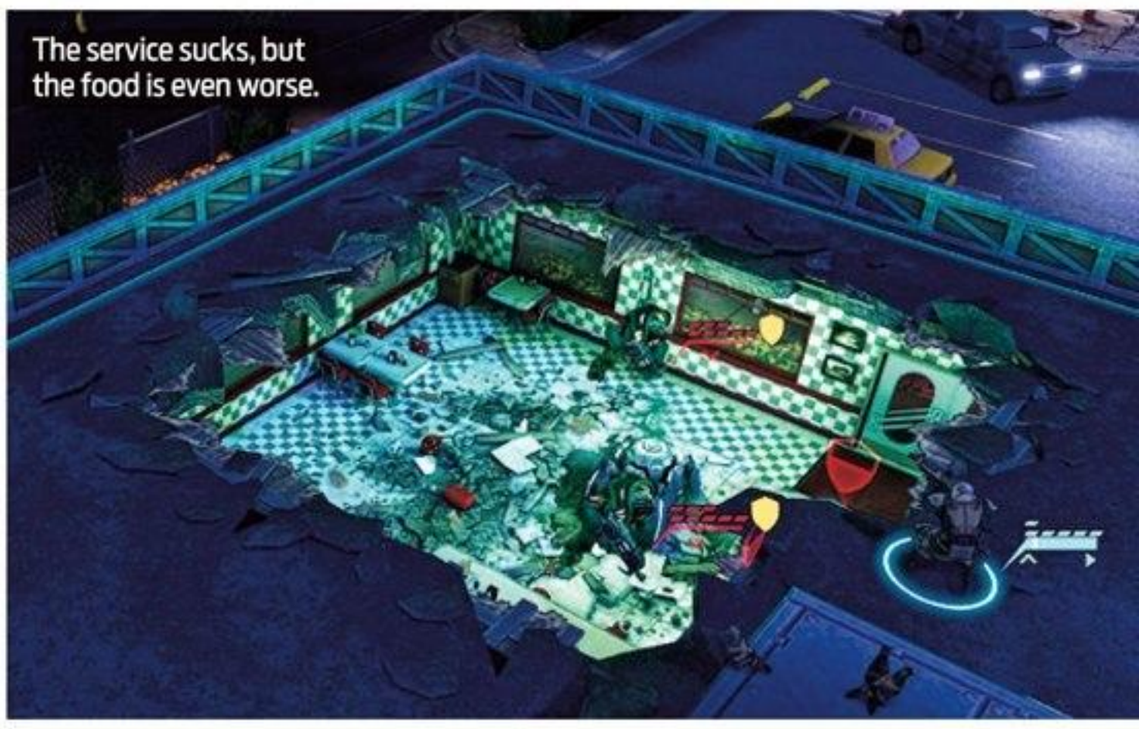


scientists and other rewards for helping, but focus too much on servicing them and your overall strategy will suffer.

It's the Mission Control room that looks most familiar. Flick to it and the camera switches to a satellite view of Earth, spinning in space. This is the original game's Geoscape. From here you can scan for UFOs in regions covered by your

**_X-COM_ was returning—as a first-person shooter wasn't what fans wanted. _This_ is what you wanted.**

satellites. If you find them, you can go fight them. That might mean scrambling an Interceptor to tackle the UFO in the air, assuming you've built one nearby. Or it might mean picking up to six of your best soldiers and going to fight them on the ground.

Jake does the latter. As the mission loads, the screen shows the Skyranger blasting across the sky. Like everything I've seen so far, it looks modern, updated, but still feels a lot like the original. It's *X-COM* turned *XCOM*-nom-nom.

With the original *X-COM*, British game designer Julian Gollop and his brother Nick set out to create a follow-up to their game *Laser Squad*. Then called *Laser Strike 2*, they signed the game with MicroProse, who'd just had enormous success with Sid Meier's *Civilization*. Their new publisher suggested the Gollop's bring a similar scale to their next game.

Eventually released as *X-COM: UFO Defense* in 1994 (*UFO: Enemy Unknown* in Europe), the game married the squad tactics of *Laser Squad* with a global strategy layer and a modern day setting.

When soldiers die in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, like its predecessors, they die for good. That doesn't sound like a big deal at first; units die in strategy games all the time. But you invest so much more in an *XCOM* soldier.

Let's imagine. A new recruit joins XCOM, and you name him Jimmy Doyle. He starts off as a rookie, with low stats and a lot of nerves. You customize his appearance. On his first mission, he comes face to face with a Muton. A large, gorilla-like alien, the Muton uses a special ability to pound his own chest and panic the rookie. Doyle fires wildly without you telling him to, but you get him behind cover before the Muton kills him, and he survives the rest of the mission.

Doyle then levels up to Squaddie and earns himself a unique nickname. He's now Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle. At this point in the original *X-COM*, you'd be putting a a number of points into an enormous wall of stats, but that system has completely changed. Recruits now have a small number of stats that level automatically, and when they reach Squaddie, reveal a predilection for one of four classes: Heavy, Sniper, Support or Assault.

You don't want to get caught stealing a newspaper in *this* city.

"Great. I forgot my scalpel."

Sure, I can hide behind it, but what's its gas mileage?

At each level-up, you make a decision about which of two class-specific perks to grant your recruit. It means you're making fewer choices than in the original game, but each choice is far more significant.

Popeye falls into the Assault class, and so you give him a passive perk. Now every time he sees an enemy, the percentage chance of him scoring a critical hit goes up. In the next 10 or 20 hours, you're going to take Popeye on a dozen missions. You're going to micromanage every piece of equipment he carries, every step he takes, every shot he makes. You're going to have tailored the equipment available to him by the research options you've chosen back at base. You're going to have shaped the team around him, so he has a Sniper for support, or a bunch of Assault guys, or a plethora of robotic heavy weapons platforms as his sidekicks. He's going to have leveled a bunch more times, and you're going to have picked a bunch more perks for him.

**At each level-up, you make a decision about which perks to grant your recruit.**

He's now your favorite toy out of all your toy soldiers. He's meaningful. You'll have thought about him as much as you did about your Khajiit in *Skyrim* or your *Monk* in *Diablo III*.

Jake's mission loads, and his squad is standing outside a gas station. The graphics are much less cartoony than the original game's low resolution sprites, but the game's artists aren't aiming for gritty reality. The characters and models look chunky, sort of like action figures.

One by one, Jake orders his recruits to move up nearer the gaspumps and take cover. He only has four soldiers along for this mission, and with research, that can be upgraded to a maximum of six.

Time units, the resource that allowed you to perform actions in the original, are also completely gone. Now, each soldier can move once and perform a single action per turn. An action is anything from shooting a weapon to hunkering down behind something as part of the new cover system.

## Alien Nation

Almost instantly, one of Jake's recruits spots a couple of Sectoids. We're introduced to them by a short, in-engine cutscene. The Sectoids look less child-like than the original game, but they're clearly inspired



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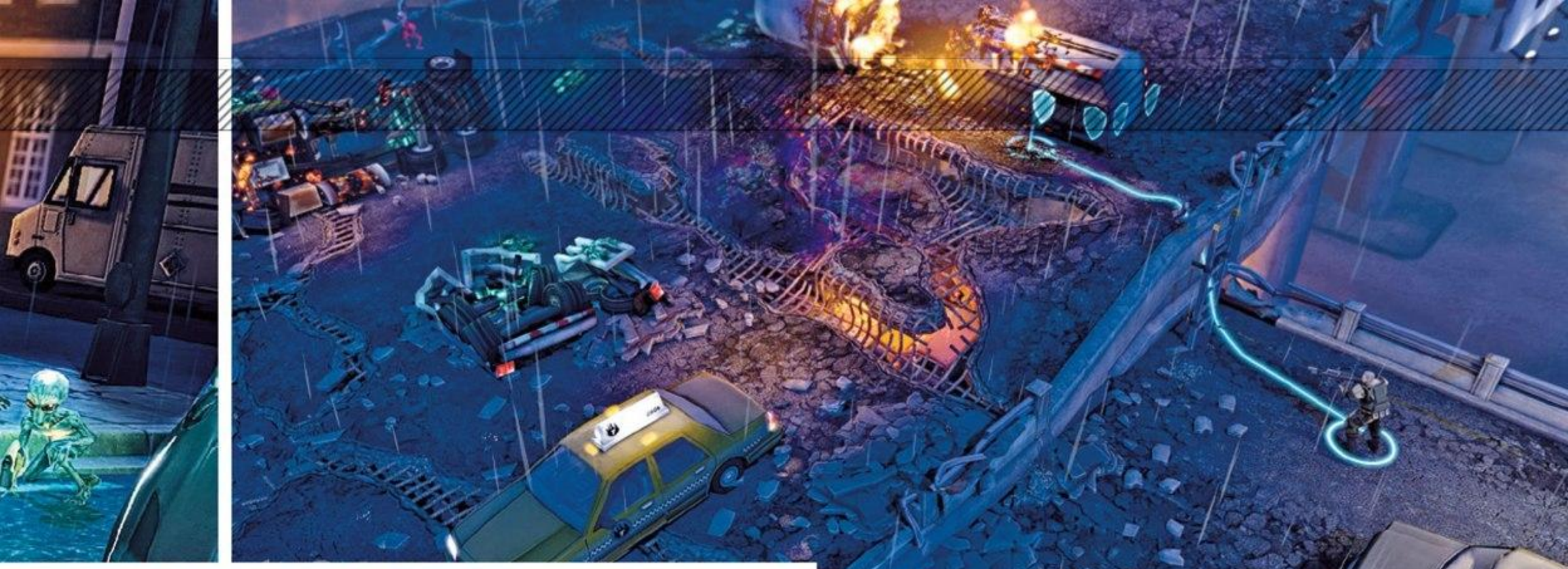


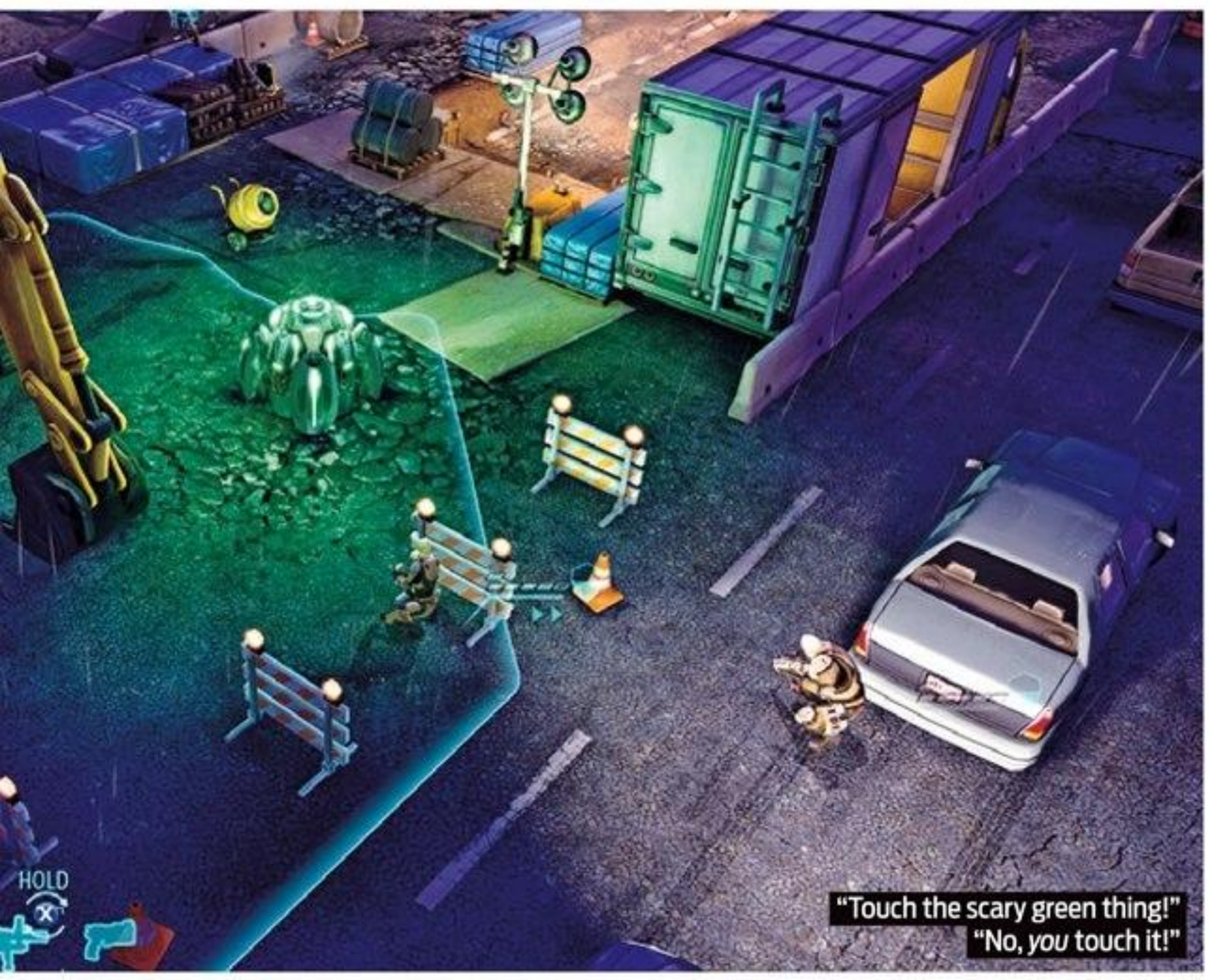

by the same source material: they're grey, skinny, with big heads and bug eyes.

One Sectoid moves inside the gas station, while another takes cover behind a nearby car. Jake finds his Sniper, and using a special grapplehook, has her climb onto the ceiling. She'll come in handy later.

Back down below, The Sectoid inside the building uses a special ability to form a psychic link with the one taking cover outside, boosting its stats.

These are Sectoids though, the weakest alien in the game. Jake has his Heavy lay down suppressing fire, and orders his Assault soldier to toss a grenade inside the vehicle. As it explodes, the camera cuts in close for the second time to show the Sectoid's death. It'll do this a few more times to mark each kill and each new alien introduction. It's a minor intrusion.

The Assault soldier then bursts through the front door of the gas station and takes down the remaining Sectoid. Unfortunately, there's a downside to speed: the noise made from rushing inside has alerted some Mutons in an adjacent room. Mutons are another classic *X-COM* alien. In the original, they were big and brutish, but looked like a Mexican wrestler wearing a unitard. Now they're more menacing, wearing a bulky metal suit, big shoulders and lots of muscle. They're still recognizably Mutons, though.

Now, imagine that soldier was Popeye Doyle, the recruit you've developed over the last 20 hours. Then imagine that you could've done things differently, and hadn't rushed through the door, but opened it slowly and quietly to avoid alerting the Mutons. Imagine you hadn't gone inside at all, but had your Heavy blow apart the wall with a rocket launcher. Imagine you'd left Popeye back at base for this one, and brought a team of robots instead.

You made decisions—from what to research, to what to carry, to who to bring, to how to develop those people—and every one of those decisions impacted down a long chain so that now Popeye is dead.

After seeing the game, a lot of my fears have been put to rest. It looks like *X-COM*. Everything I saw was running on a PC, but played with a gamepad. I asked Jake afterwards if the user interface would be the same across PC and console.

He laughed. "Nooo. Oh man, no...We have a team that's doing the PC UI, and our tactical UI is a standalone PC tactical UI." It's still in flux, and not ready to be shown.

Although what I was shown was a relatively thin slice of the full game, that doesn't mean that's all that they've made. "You can play all the way through," says Solomon. "Over Christmas break, I actually did a Let's Play *XCOM* for our team."

Jake Solomon really *does* love *X-COM*. the Firaxis folks are desperate to make sure you know that, but it's not bull. They want you to know that they're aware how much *you* care, and as corny as it sounds, how hard they're going to work to make you happy. ■

***Graham Smith***

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# RIDGE RACER: UNBOUNDED

**PLAYED IT** Build your city and tear it down again in this arcade racer

Police cars stampede like antelope across the freeway, careening into oncoming traffic and riding up on crash barriers. Behind them, plowing implacably onwards, is an angry red truck. I'm driving that truck.

To say that *Ridge Racer: Unbounded* encourages aggressive driving would be an understatement. It's by Bugbear, developer of the original *FlatOut* games, and represents a thorough reworking of the previously console-exclusive arcade racer. The series' signature drifting simulation features only peripherally in the Frag Attack mode I'm currently playing. As the timer ticks down, I swing my truck from side to side, sending police cars flying and bursting into balls of flame. Each crushed car earns me a few seconds on the clock, and a boost to the power bar that periodically enables me to surge forward, wrecking everything in my path. I'm chiefly sticking to the wrong side of the road: the hapless oncoming traffic neither slows me down nor earns me any points, but I can't see what else it could be there for.

Frag Attack isn't the sum of the game, but it does capture the vehicular carnage at its core. Even the more traditional race mode (called Dominate) encourages you to crash into anything that isn't nailed down on your way to the finish line. *Unbounded* is so named for the fact that its drivers are unrestricted by sense, physics, or respect for property. Want to drive smoothly and cleanly? Forget it. A delicate drift around a corner earns you power, and power lets you open shortcuts by ramming headlong into obstacles, shooting forward in a cone of red light, rubble and shrapnel. The first time you take the scenic route through the walls of a mausoleum, *Unbounded*'s mission statement becomes more or less clear.

**As the timer ticks down, I swing my truck from side to side, sending police cars flying.**

The vehicles feel weighty enough that slamming them into walls isn't a concern, but it only takes a moment's miscalculation—or the aggressive attention of another driver—to trigger a spin-out. Crashes are rendered using physics instead of relying on canned animations. This means twirling, flaming hunks of wreckage sent soaring across the track as the game shifts into an appreciative slow-motion panning shot. Producer Joonas Laakso's favorite game, he says, is *Burnout 3*, and it's not difficult to figure out what he thought was the best thing about it.

In Dominate, respawns are quick and crashes are an inevitable, but recoverable, setback. In Survival mode, however, every racer gets a single, precious life. This changes the rhythm of play completely, encouraging calculated risk-taking and precise timing. Firing off your boost at the wrong moment can cause you to you wreck yourself, even without the help of your competitors. It's necessary to think

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twice before this happens.

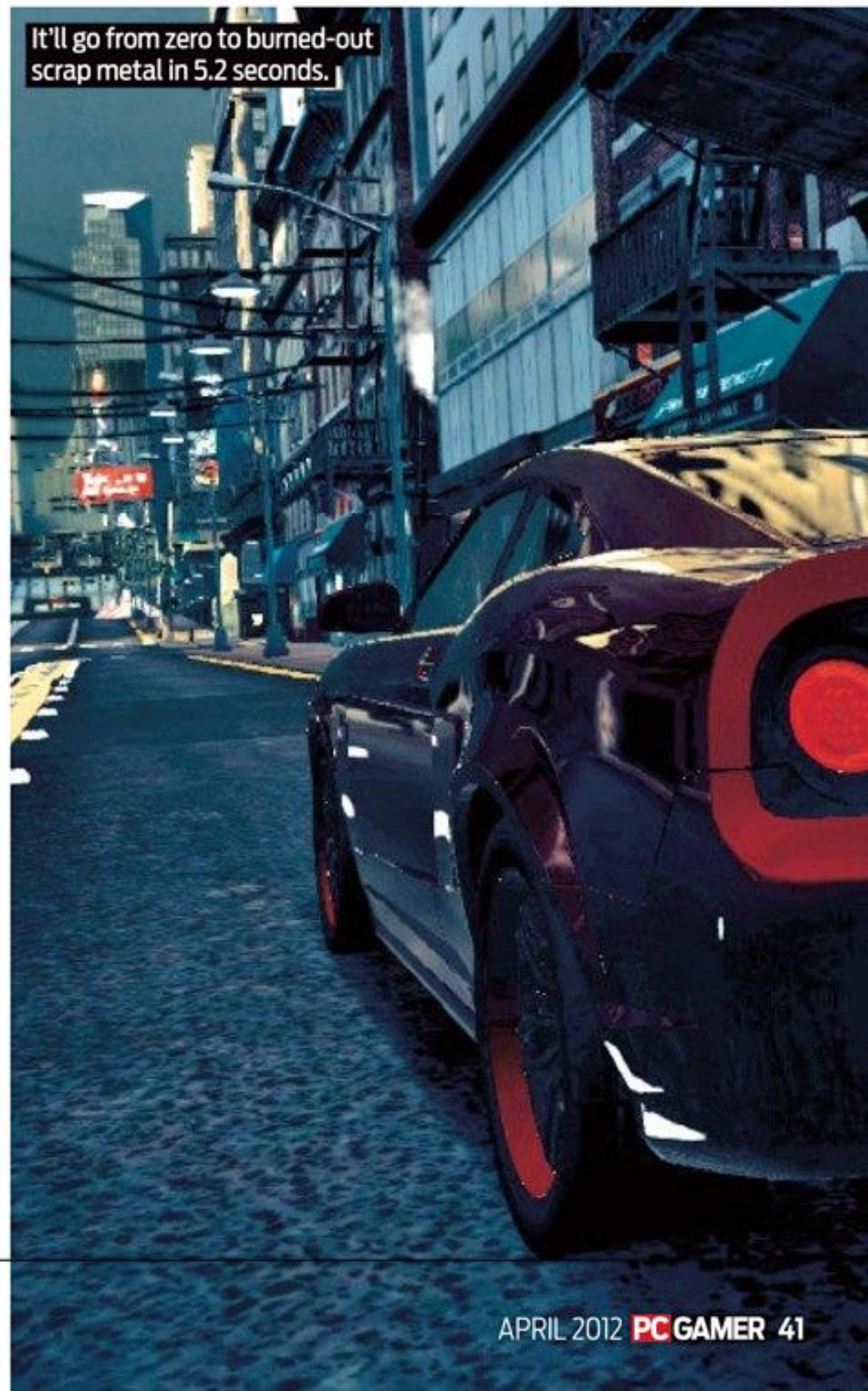
The other modes are designed to teach the basic skills needed to succeed in the core game: Frag Attack for aggression, and Drift Challenge for, well, sliding around corners in order to communicate how cool you are. It's important that these mechanics are polished, because *Unbounded* comes with a fully-fledged track editor that allows players to compete on whatever kind of course they feel like making. The feature came about due to a desire to add value to what is otherwise a straightforward experience. "The time has passed for this kind of simple arcade offering," explains Laakso. "We felt like we really needed to offer something extra."

At the most basic level, constructing a track is a case of laying out blocks—each a tiny clump of city with a predetermined racing line—on an eight-by-eight grid. As long as your course has a starting line and loops back on itself, you can build what you like within the confines of a budget. The budget is determined by the available texture memory, and Bugbear is willing to consider increasing this for PCs that can handle it.

In order to upload a track for online use, you'll first have to prove that you can beat it yourself. This establishes the par time for the course, and confirms that the track is valid—essential, given *Unbounded*'s persistent ranking system.

Simply getting a track up and running is as easy as a game of *Pipe Dream*, which the basic editor strongly resembles—albeit with roads and cars instead of pipes and goo. For the dedicated few, however, an advanced mode will allow for the placement and minute adjustment of individual track elements on the fly (and yes, it'll support mouse and keyboard on the PC). It's possible for the same repeating block to be manipulated into a whole race course, with custom-tooled barriers, jumps, and physics-defying loop-de-loops. It's incredibly flexible, Laakso claims, which he subsequently demonstrates by driving headlong through a stack of explosive barrels and a giant plywood dinosaur. ■

***Chris Thursten***




**Release MARCH 2012**

Just checked my wristwatch—it is, in fact, Hammertime.

Death's trusty raven, Dust, will nudge lost players in the right direction.

In confidence, War told me how jealous he is of Death's wall-running abilities.

Never challenge Death to a staring contest. He always wins.

# DARKSIDERS II

**FIRST LOOK** Reaping souls and snagging loot as the Pale Rider

Seasons don't fear the Reaper, but if you're of demonic descent and you plan on getting in this Horseman's way, you've got every right to be afraid of Death. *Darksiders II* puts you behind the morbid mask of Death himself, taking the fine-tuned, combo-centric combat of the first game and infusing it with a dash of RPG flavoring. As it turns out, ushering your enemies into eternal rest is that much sweeter when their corpse might contain the slick new dual-scythes you've been looking for.

When his brother War is accused of triggering Armageddon, Death sets out to clear his fellow Horseman's name. That means cruising through heaven and hell alike, punching in faces and slashing out intestines until someone gives you answers. Whereas War's methods prioritized brute force, Death is all about dexterity, with *Prince of Persia*-style platforming segments and an emphasis on evasion and quick strikes in combat.

Haydn Dalton, lead designer on *Darksiders II*, claims that this sequel's content will eclipse the apocalyptic landscapes of the original game. To facilitate your adventurous instinct, you'll be given the reins to your trusty steed Despair right from the get-go. "The world's larger now—we wanted to give the player a reward for going out and exploring it," says Dalton. The grandest of these rewards? Entire full-fledged dungeons containing boss encounters and loot drops that some players may never stumble upon.

**"If I kill him, I might get the piece of gear I want—so I'm gonna kill his ass."**

Yes, loot drops—Death will experience a compulsion that War never faced: the undying urge to slay every last enemy and pilfer whatever weapons and armor hit the ground. "There's a lot of different loot delivery systems, but killing creatures is the obvious one," says Dalton. "In the first game, you would see some creatures and think 'Meh, I don't [want to bother] killing him.' But loot gives you that gambling feeling, where you think 'If I kill that guy, I just might get that piece of gear I really want—so I'm gonna kill his ass.'"

When deciding Death's attire, you've got options. With three tiers of armor to choose from—Necromancer (improved spellcasting), Slayer (heavy armor), or Wanderer (speed and agility)—and two skill trees, you can specialize strengths or minimize weaknesses. Dalton expresses that these choices "feed into the character customization aspect of the game. You'll need to look for what you think will be the optimal path for you, and what synergizes with [your preferred style of gameplay]."

With the introduction of skill trees, side quests, and leveling up, could multiplayer show up? Dalton remained tight-lipped, but admitted: "there's definitely more than just single-player. That's what we originally wanted to do—a four-player Four Horsemen game." ■

***Lucas Sullivan***

**READ ME**
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**DEVELOPER** Vigil Games
**LINK** darksiders.com

**Release Q2 2012**



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# RELEASE METER

## 3 MONTHS AWAY

### ALAN WAKE

Alan Wake will finally make good on his 2005 promise to appear on PC. Better still, Remedy's ambitious tale of mountain town terror will launch with both the game's DLC episodes.

**Release** Q1 2012

### THE DARKNESS II

For too long "Quad Wielding" has been reserved solely for Goro from *Mortal Kombat* and Hindu gods. Jackie Estacado and his tentacle pals are bringing simul-shootin' n' slashin' back to the people!

**Release** Q1 2012

### THE SECRET WORLD

Imagine a place where every myth, urban legend, and conspiracy theory you've ever brushed off was actually true. Oh wait, *The Secret World*'s already doing that.

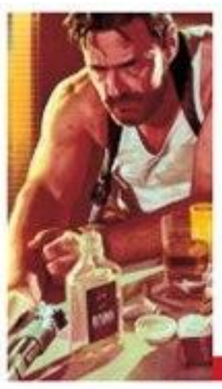
**Release** APRIL 2012

### RISEN 2: DARK WATERS

What can you do with a drunken sailor? Put him in an action RPG! The nameless swashbuckler from the original *Risen* returns in this upcoming sequel.

**Release** APRIL 24, 2012

## 6 MONTHS AWAY



### MAX PAYNE 3

You mock Payne? LIFE IS PAYNE, Highness! Anyone who says differently is selling something... Namely, Rockstar. Also available in a Special Edition!

**Release** MAY 29, 2012

### BORDERLANDS 2

The world's finest (only?) co-op role-playing shooter returns with enhanced weapon customization, four new playable characters, and thankfully, drastically overhauled vehicle physics.

**Release** JUNE 30TH

### TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON FUTURE SOLDIER

Tom Clancy's been a busy boy. This oft-delayed soldier of the future is getting shooty and stabby this summer.

**Release** Q2 2012

### STAR TREK

If there's one thing J.J. Abrams *Star Trek* needed, it's more lens flare. The luminous medium of video games should have no problem increasing unnecessary blooms of blinding light.

**Release** Q2 2012

## 9+ MONTHS AWAY

### PREY 2

While it bears almost no resemblance to the 2006 original, playing as a parkour space bounty hunter is one helluva consolation. Who wouldn't want to play *Mirror's Edge* in *Bladerunner*?!

**Release** TBA 2012

### METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGANCE

Few things should make PC gamers more jealous than the lack of a modern *Metal Gear* and/or *anything* from Platinum Games. This would make for a great apology.

**Release** TBA 2012

### SCROLLS

How is Mojang following up its phenomenon of digital LEGOs? By adapting another IRL pastime! Expect a unique spin on the underrepresented fundamentals of trading cards and board games.

**Release** TBA 2012

### TOTAL RECALL

Go back and watch the 1990 Paul Verhoven classic. Two hours later you'll undoubtedly be dying to hoof it to Mars. Hey, if this MMO's a success, can we get one set in *Robocop*'s Detroit?

**Release** TBA 2012

## ON YOUR RADAR THE TOP 13 MOST-ANTICIPATED PC GAMES

1. DIABLO III
2. GRAND THEFT AUTO V
3. **GUILD WARS 2** ▶▶
4. TOMB RAIDER
5. RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY
6. GHOST RECON ONLINE
7. GHOST RECON FUTURE SOLDIER
8. MAX PAYNE 3
9. TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW 6: PATRIOTS
10. OF ORCS AND MEN
11. RISEN 2: DARK WATERS
12. WAKFU
13. END OF NATIONS

"*Guild Wars 2* seems to be promising a lot of new things for an MMO. Less grind, more story and unique content."

***– Brendan Hesse, via Twitter***

"Looks stellar! And a much needed revamp of the RPG style they created with *Guild Wars 1*"

***– Edward Philips, via Twitter***

*Source: Ipsos OTX GamePlan Insights. Top titles based on purchase intent are collected via a weekly tracking study of 1,000 active gamers in the US between the ages of 13-59. Since launching in 2008, GamePlan has collected data on over 100,000 gamers across 2,500+ titles.*

### BEST GUESS

**STALKER 2**
Back in mid-December, reports circulated that the founder and CEO of GSC Gameworld was closing the company and ceasing production on the game. A sign of hope came from *STALKER 2*'s official Twitter, stating "We will do our best to continue. However... nothing is certain." This game's future remains north of shaky.

Windows®. Life without Walls™, CyberPower recommends Windows 7

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# T-SIZED

**PLANETSIDE 2** wants to be a player-driven, PvP-only, free-to-play FPS. It may be the most audacious game ever made. Can the studio that created *EverQuest* pull it off? ***by Evan Lahti***

A Liberator attack gunship flies with a Reaver fighter-escort on its wing.

Many vehicles, like the ATV, are shared between factions.

Developing an MMOFPS requires intense focus, unwavering commitment, and a stark willingness to court failure. To make one, your designers have to be alchemists, your artists have to be engineers, and your coders have to develop a universe that never sleeps (presumably without any sleep themselves). It's a merciless genre with few precedents to fall back on, one that other talented developers (like CCP, Hi-Rez, or Red 5 Studios) have stumbled over, or are still struggling to accomplish.

*PlanetSide 2* in particular presents a balancing problem on par with *StarCraft II*: three factions waging, potentially, 666 vs. 666 vs. 666 combat per server with dozens of player-customized weapons and vehicles on continents as large as 64 sq km. From a technical standpoint, it'll need netcode nimbler than *Tribes 2*'s—programming that flexes under the strain of hundreds of those players rushing to reinforce a single, vital base. And when you touch it, it still has to walk and talk like a first-person shooter—agile, rooted in player skill, crackling with emergent gameplay, headshots, squad systems, PhysX-enabled vehicles (check, by the way), stealth mechanics, and everything else we've come to expect from a sophisticated FPS.

That's the challenge Sony Online Entertainment has taken on. It's without a doubt the most ambitious FPS I've ever seen. And with all that, the only thing I want to do in it right now is be a guy that drives an unarmed, burly transport truck. I want to be a tactical chauffeur.

I want to be counted on to get 10 men where they need to go intact, yell something encouraging over VOIP when they dismount, and nothing else. I want to know nuances of the southern zones of *PS2*'s canyony continent, Indar, and be able to tell you why a valley insertion from the northeast is safest (the Terran air patrols tend to shift to the south at night). That's me.

I want to be a goddamned good combat bus driver, and, by some miracle, *PlanetSide 2* might actually support my obscure fantasy, along with dozens of other player-authored roles. Maybe you'd rather be a front-line medic, or an anti-air specialist. These are the kind of personal experiences an MMOFPS absolutely must deliver, and I'm spending the day at Sony Online's San Diego offices to observe firsthand how *PlanetSide 2* intends to render them.

## Light warfare

Matt Higby is controlling the sun. He's *PS2*'s creative director, and he's used a console command to multiply *PlanetSide*'s day-night transition rate 120 times. The star is crawling against the cosmos at the speed of *Super Mario*'s malicious sun.

As he gives me a glimmer of a reality-in-progress, Higby sounds like a proud god. "We have this realtime dynamic shadow system, it works with our realtime dynamic cloud system, so the sun will actually create shadows on the ground and in the battlefield based on the clouds that are up ahead, which are dynamically generated."

*PlanetSide 2* is primordial—at the moment, clearly still in its alpha



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**"We're an FPS game first."**

***PlanetSide 2* Creative Director Matt Higby**

phase—but Higby won't shut up about all this raytracing, normal-mapped clouds, and admittedly beautiful sky activity happening in his world-embryo. "We're going to be layering in things like weather, and a satellite system that lets us have stars and space stations—basically proxy space battles happening up above. And again, that all goes back to trying to build a world, not just a map."

That last bit sounds a little like a tagline, so I push him. I ask if attacking with the sun at your back will be a viable tactic—using glare to blind your enemy. It will be. "It's neat to be able to say, 'Well, let's wait 30 minutes for the sun be in this position, and then we won't have to deal with that, we'll be able to pick off guys up there a lot easier,'" Higby says. "Those sorts of tactical decisions are what great generals and war leaders have used for hundreds of years, and allowing players to use that kind of stuff adds an extra layer of depth."

Deciding that *PlanetSide 2* is a shooter first and foremost is what allows Higby, and the rest of Sony Online, to put absurd, wonderful stuff like tactical sunlight into their game. Making something that tries to wedge itself between MMO and FPS is a misstep that's been made by other developers. It creates compromises that upsets fans of both genres, and SOE gets that. "We're an FPS game first, and the most important thing is 'fps' in an FPS game. Frames per second. Otherwise it's not an FPS," says Higby.

## Getting certified

Higby puts me behind an ATV. It's heartening the way the wheels forget their traction a bit when I turn hard at high speed. And that I can freelook while driving. And that the UI shows what gear I'm in. And that I can strap C4 to the headlights and make my bike into a bomb. And further, that I'll be able to decide in that vehicle's certification tree—*PS2*'s skill system—if I'd rather have a high horsepower, low torque spec or level-up a high torque, low horsepower variant for hill-climbing.

When *PS2* was announced, veterans of the original were skeptical about whether or not the addition of explicit classes—something that the original game forewent in favor of fully-customizable equipment loadouts—would undermine the specialized roles that *PS* is known for. *Tribes: Ascend*, another rebooted sci-fi shooter, has received similar criticism for adopting a class system.

When I mention this, Higby indicates that he thinks classes will encourage more diversity across the playerbase, not less. "You could have a heal tool, a repair tool, 10 grenades and a machinegun," Higby says of the original game. "That could be your loadout and you'd just go to town with that. We've definitely moved away from that. As soon as you start putting in crazy capabilities in an open system, people are going to find two of them that are really broken when they work together and exploit it. By sectioning those off, it allows us to have each one of these classes have really special gameplay."

Classes won't be one-dimensional archetypes, Higby says. They'll each have one or more certification trees that can be leveled, using points that are (like *EVE Online*) earned automatically, whether you're online or off. Active players will earn certification points atop that allowance. None of *PS2*'s abilities are set in stone, but an Engineer could, say, train up his repair speed; a Medic might unlock "Symbiotic Healing," a perk that heals you when you revive allies. A MAX suit

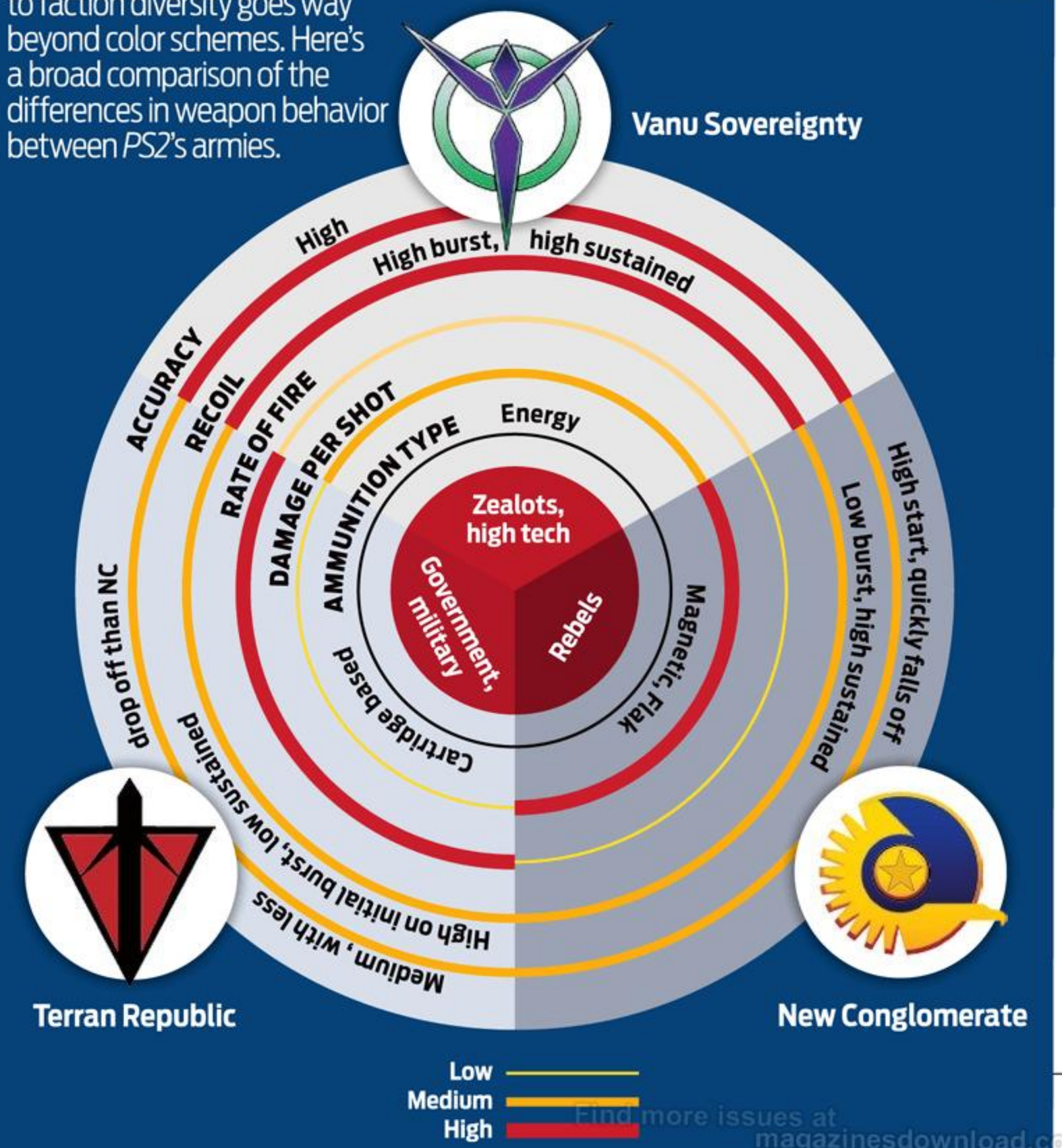
SOE has confirmed joystick functionality for vehicles.

You can attach a mine guard to most land vehicles, which absorbs the impact of one or more of the exploding traps.

A Terran Light Assault. Classes aren't permanent choices, and can be changed at any inventory station.

## THREE-WAY

SOE's *StarCraft*-like approach to faction diversity goes way beyond color schemes. Here's a broad comparison of the differences in weapon behavior between *PS2*'s armies.




(a designated class for using *PS2*'s hulking mini-mechs) could learn the ability to equip the same weapon type on both arms.

Readability and easier threat recognition are other benefits that classes contribute, Higby says. "In *PlanetSide*, you would see some dude and you would have no idea what they were going to be able to do to you. Having that predictability of, 'I see that guy, he's an Engineer, I know he can do these few things to me.' That's critical. All those predictability elements add a lot to people being able to learn how to play the game."

## War crafting

SOE only put a few weapons in my hands during my visit to the studio, but *PS2*'s weapon handling fell somewhere between *Borderlands* and *Tribes*—intuitive, but not so slight that I didn't have to think. I could rack up an easy kill at medium range by stamping Mouse 1 with my New Conglomerate Gauss Rifle, but after about two seconds my ironsights would hiccup 45 degrees and I'd be completely off-target. "We do have realistic ballistics in the game. Bullets do drop over time, they do lose damage over time. We don't have some of the stuff like,

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The Vanu Sovereignty: sleek, purple, energy weapon-toting, and crazy about ancient technology.

Unlockables for this Vanguard tank include a flak cannon and countermeasures.

**I yelp for help from my unarmored teammates; I feel like a bully being bullied.**

say, penetration. A lot of it's just, how much simulation can you really be doing when you're talking about potentially millions of bullets flying around at once?"

As a Light Assault I could activate a jump-pack to bounce over an outer wall, or spring over the head of a foe in a face-to-face shootout, daring them to try and finish me off in the air while one of my teammates dealt the killing blow. When I spawn as a MAX suit, I blast away at scattered infantry with separate weapons assigned to each mouse button. The stopping power of my chaingun arm and grenade arm is offset by a pitiful turning rate—any circle-strafing player can out-maneuver me, and they do. I yelp for help from my unarmored teammates; I feel like a bully being bullied.

"In *PlanetSide* there were three specific MAX specs per empire [anti-vehicle, anti-air, and anti-infantry]. We've made one MAX per empire with multiple weapon systems that players can configure to allow for multi-use MAXes as well as dedicated AV, AA, and AI. MAXes will continue to be fearsome units that require support, coordination and teamwork to really reach their full potential," says Higby.

Even from this hour spent in a six-person, contextless skirmish—well below what *PlanetSide*'s average battle will be—there's plenty of complexity. Higby earns an eyebrow-raise out of me when he starts talking about different missile lock mechanics they'll be adding, "from heat-seeking to camera-guided to laser-guided, and all those will be different upgrades that you can use."

What I don't have a sense of is whether that experience will hold up at a scale of hundreds of players, each with different intentions and expertise, all vying to be heroes. Creating spaces that sustain small skirmishes as well as all-out assaults is one of *PlanetSide*'s daunting design puzzles. One prong of SOE's approach to this is specialized geography: terrain that's suited to different combat. Sure, you can fly your 12-player Galaxy transport anywhere, but you may want to avoid regions where air fighters clump together like a rocket-toting gnat cloud.

Indoor areas are also embracing some "level design basics" that Higby says have emerged in the last decade. "*PlanetSide* was very heavy on facility fights. It had these circuitous corridors with different rooms. We definitely do have those large facility fights. However, our facilities are largely above ground; there aren't as many corridor and room battles. By making these above ground and having a few more navigation aids...like that map we played today, it was really easy to just look up and see, oh, here's the gigantic base with the big pulsing light sticking out of the top of it. I know if I go that way, bad guys are gonna be there."

Higby tours me around another side of Indar in a Mosquito, a Terran fighter. He emphasizes that each continent is handcrafted, that Indar is mostly red canyons, mesas and mining stations, "but it also has this highland steppe area which I've always said should look like Pride Rock from *The Lion King*," he says. Amerish is Irish highlands interrupted by giant, violet geode eggs and wild savannah. And glacial Esamir is arctic urban ruins and dead freeways cracked by the cold. "We didn't want to just spit out a bunch of height maps and throw clutter on them and say, 'Alright, go play.' If you just look at this tiny canyon area, the amount of work that needs to go into this and then all the play-testing that needs to go into making sure that this is fun is huge. But we're serious about it."

This is a quality-and-quantity approach to world-building. And for a developer, it's a goal that's incompatible with sleep. It will take thousands of manhours of testing simply to make playable. But if SOE pulls it off, *PlanetSide 2* could be an antidote to the map fatigue that crops up in many modern FPSes. Imagine a terraforming base, or a giant crater, that's

## AURAXIS NEVER SLEEPS

Flashlights and nightvision will let players battle beyond dawn.

On Indar, bases felt *Borderlands*-esque: bridges, ramps, and tight interiors embedded in rock.

The Sunderer is basically an armored ice cream truck. It can push tanks and fits 12.

conquered, then disputed, besieged, reinforced, then finally won back after a three-day weekend of counter-attacking—a skirmish later nicknamed "Labor D-Day." That player-authored history of territory control doesn't happen anywhere else in the genre. It won't be quite as free of limitations as *EVE Online*—every empire will always have a foothold base on each continent that's uncapturable—but it's the closest thing to real persistence I've seen in an FPS.

It's also imagination kerosene.

I'm wild about the prospect of emergent roles like regional specialists cropping up in *PlanetSide 2*—imagine a Canadian infantry unit that's trained and customized to do war only at night, earning a server-wide reputation for picking off outposts behind enemy lines. I love the idea of individual kills and wins having lasting meaning, and the thoughtful tactics they'll inspire—think about an empire employing a misdirection raid to divert enemy forces from the adjacent outpost that's its real target. *PlanetSide 2* could be the only shooter where stuff like patrolling or battle-planning become practical skills, not simply role-playing.

Whether or not this stuff becomes a reality relies on SOE being smart about restrictions, and building systems that support these bright and inevitable player ideas. One of SOE's solutions is the Outfit, player-created clans that comprise *PS2*'s three Empires. "I want [Outfits] to feel like the US military," says Higby. "You see someone from the 101st Airborne and you think, 'That guy is probably a badass paratrooper.' I know that they're the best when it comes to jumping out of planes. We want the Outfit customization system to feel the same way. Maybe you start your Outfit and you want them to be all about air superiority fighters. And when your Reavers come rolling over the hill, with the paintjob that only your outfit has, people will be like, holy s***, those are the badass Reaver pilots. That becomes an aspirational thing. Anybody who's a Reaver pilot on your server says, 'You know what, one day I want to join that Outfit, because that's where the serious Reaver pilots go to play.' That kind of thing is super compelling."

## Design dilemmas

The world wasn't ready for *PlanetSide* in 2003. Broadband was even less ubiquitous; having hardware render a multirole combat world where 1,000 players could be firing 10,000 bullets at any given moment meant a lot of compromises in weapon dynamics and level design.

Technology has only recently matured to render *PlanetSide*'s original vision, but there are plenty of new moles to whack as SOE's ambition swells. VOIP alone presents a brain-breaking conundrum—*PS2* needs a voice solution that all at once accommodates squad-level conversations, vehicle-specific channels (when you want to talk only to the guys in your airdrop Galaxy), and command comms. And this sys-



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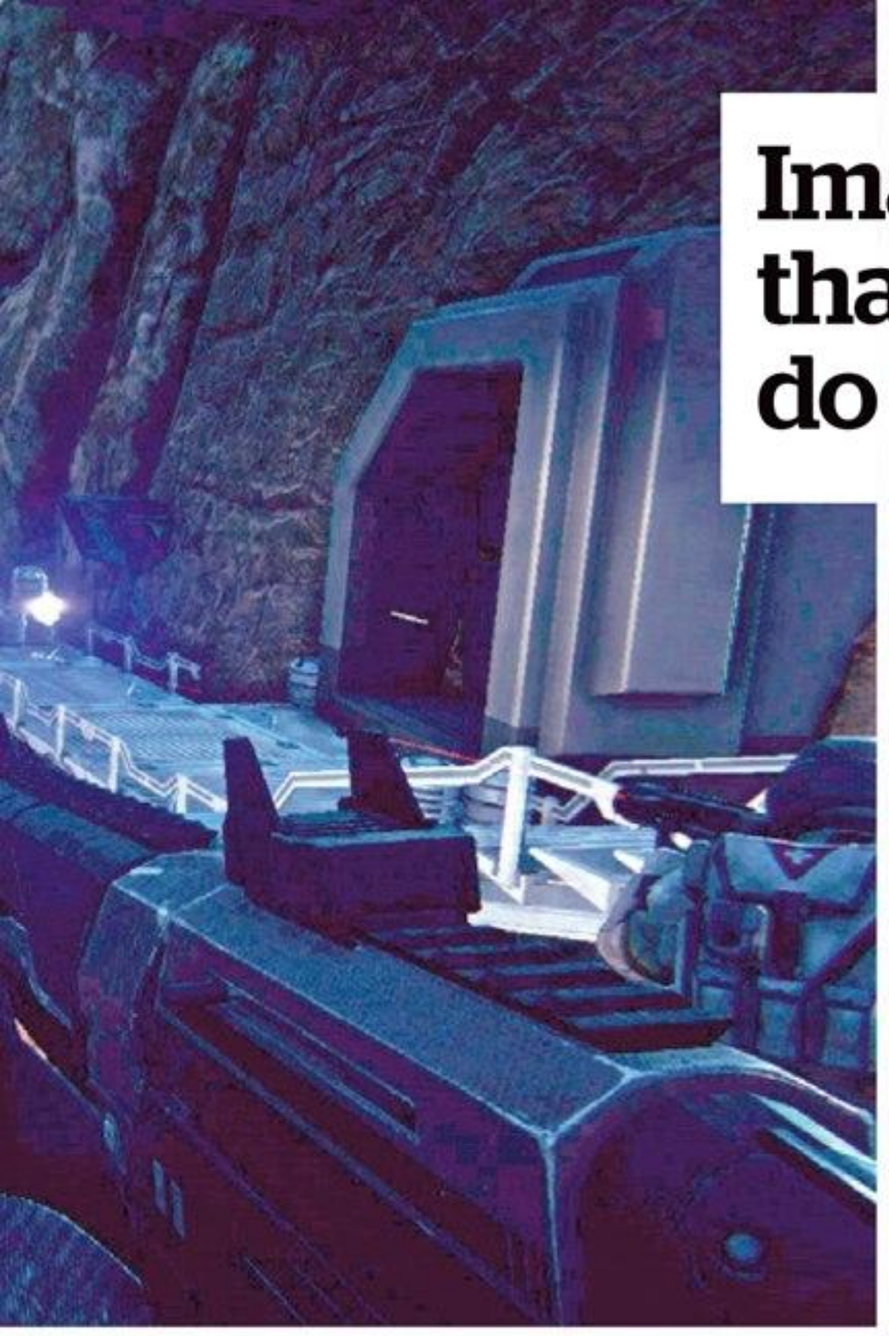

# Imagine a Canadian infantry unit that's trained and customized to do war only at night.

tem needs to be flexible enough that hardcore clans will use it instead of a dedicated TeamSpeak server, which would separate novices from the battle chatter of hardcore players.

SOE is unwilling to hint at a release or beta date, but I'd confidently say *PS2* is a 2013 game on the basis that there's still so much to be done. Primary content and major systems are still in-progress; December 2011 was the first time SOE put on a live gameplay demo internally. The purchasing and cooldown mechanics for vehicle buying are up in the air; stuff like vehicle hacking (hijacking) is being experimented with and may not be implemented.

Even the decision to allow one player class to wield a new weapon takes a lot of tempered thought and testing, as Higby highlights: "In terms of moment-to-moment gameplay, we've changed some stuff pretty significantly. Back in *PlanetSide*, cloakers were more of a melee class, they were more about subversion, sneaking behind enemy lines and hacking things. We've added sniping to the Infiltrator class. When you're loaded out with a sniper rifle you have a lesser cloaking device. You're visible as an outline, you're never perfectly cloaked, even if you're holding completely still. And when you fire, it's like the Klingon cloaking devices,—you can't fire while cloaked. In *PlanetSide*, you were actually able to change your contrast on your monitor to a degree where if they were moving at all, you'd be able to see them, and there was really no benefit to using the stealth suit in that case. We're going to make stealthing work like real invisibility should in the game, where you're not even getting packets from someone you shouldn't be seeing."

## Head in the clouds

I end the day in a corner office with Ryan Elam, Technical Director, and Tramell Isaac, *PS2*'s Senior Art Director (who created *Fallout*'s iconic Vault Boy). They're waxing nostalgic about a raid gone wrong.

"You don't have a lot of 'remember whens' in *Battlefield* or in other modern first-person shooters," Elam starts. "But in *PlanetSide* everyone has that moment of 'Remember when we were trying to drop into the base with 20 guys out of a Galaxy and we all got massacred by one dude?' There's all these epic events that happen, and you get to share that with your friends... same with your first dragon raid in a typical MMO. That's the kind of stuff that we can't make happen. We give you the tools and we let you make that moment yourself."

Issac leans forward from his desk: "We all drop-podded into an orbital strike, that was the best one." Everyone in the room laughs. "Oh, hey, let's go! *AAAAUGH*!'"

"I love making games that people get attached to." Elam smiles.

SOE knows what they want to preserve from the first *PlanetSide*: persistent, modern FPS gameplay that facilitates scrapbook-worthy moments. The studio's opportunities for failure seem infinite—they're building a PvP-only, hundreds-on-hundreds-on-hundreds triple-A shooter with three distinct factions, and they want players to have almost all the say in creating the fun. And they're making it free-to-play. That's not a game, that's a Manhattan Project.

But if you play *Arma*, *EVE*, or *Stalker*, you know that some of the best experiences on PC come from studios that plot a course for another dimension, come up short, but still end up producing something that latches onto one of our deep-set needs as PC gamers: writing our own stories. At the very least, I expect *PlanetSide 2* to join that company. ■

## TRICKED-OUT TANK

*PS2*'s art team wants to create unprecedented customization for vehicles and soldiers. Modular armor and weapons, decals, and paint will all be on the menu. Here's one possible progression arc for a single vehicle.

**THE MAGRIDER** A medium hover (and therefore amphibious) tank developed and used exclusively by the Vanu Sovereignty, *PlanetSide 2*'s purplest faction.

1 This is the Magrider base chassis. The factory model is fitted with a powerful, Vanu-specific anti-infantry weapon, the Pulsed Particle Accelerator.

2 Forward armor plating that reduces damage taken from the front quadrant has been installed. Up top, the gunner seat has swapped to a dedicated anti-armor weapon, the Heavy Rail Beam.

3 Side armor plating protects against lateral attacks. Rear stabilizers (the tan fins) have been attached for improved maneuverability.

4 A forest camouflage pattern has been applied; perhaps this Magrider is preparing to fight on *PlanetSide 2*'s green continent, Amerish.

# GAME of the YEAR awards 2012

## Twelve awards. Twelve awesome games. One amazing year for PC gamers.

If it happens in videogames, it happens on the PC first. Every year, developers conjure new ways to dazzle, mystify, challenge, and entertain us—some with a handful of deceptively simple game mechanics and a unique art style, others by building entire worlds that accommodate whatever role we choose to play in them. Whatever the approach, the big advancements always take place on the only platform without masters or limitations.

That makes handing out our awards every year an excruciating task. Because there are plenty of games that did things well and many games that do them extraordinarily well, but only one that can be said to have done something best.

These awards are a tribute to those games—the ones that, in a year of outstanding work, stood above the rest; the games that set the high mark for each category and put the challenge to developers in 2012: top *that*.



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MMO OF THE YEAR

# DC Universe Online

The epic showdowns from the comic books and TV shows we grew up with are masterfully recreated in *DC Universe Online* with often grim intensity—and we're not forced to be the good guy. Combat is refreshingly deep, the player customization gives incredible freedom (in both looks and play style), and Gotham and Metropolis are filled with secrets to explore and collectible goodies to find. Its costume collection system is the best ever made, and every MMO should steal its two-person Duo dungeons design.

Every gamer should have this MMO installed, and play through it at least once—there's hardly any reason not to, given the game's generous free-to-play content—and then keep an eye out for content packs that emphasize their favorite characters, including Flash, Green Lantern, and Brainiac (pictured below).

**PUBLISHER** Sony Online Entertainment

**DEVELOPER** Sony Online Entertainment

SIMULATION OF THE YEAR

# DCS: A-10C Warthog

Meticulously crafted by Moscow-based Eagle Dynamics, this über-accurate study simulation of the USAF's A-10C Thunderbolt close air support fighter sets the bar for PC combat flight sims so high it may never be eclipsed. From its fully clickable and stunningly accurate 3D cockpit to its high fidelity avionics and flight modeling, *DCS: A-10C Warthog* delivers a master class in advanced flight simming.

If you want to be a fighter jock—a *real* fighter jock—it doesn't get any better than this.

**PUBLISHER** The Fighter Collection

**DEVELOPER** Eagle Dynamics

STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR

# Frozen Synapse

Forethought is the key to any great strategy game, and *Frozen Synapse* delivers a brilliant tool to predict (but never guarantee) what'll happen—a preview button. It's around this single mechanic that all the other elements come together so elegantly. Positioning, setting the timing and rules of engagement of units—it's all intuitive battle-programming, analogous to writing down a musical score and having it played back to you by an arena of rockets, machineguns, and splattered blood.

**PUBLISHER** Mode 7 Games

**DEVELOPER** Mode 7 Games

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ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR

# Gemini Rue

The lo-fi graphics, the classic adventure game mechanics, the *Blade Runner*-style combination of hard science fiction and gritty noir—*Gemini Rue* is steeped in PC gaming nostalgia. But don't let that fool you: it's fusion of a strong, linear narrative with gameplay that doesn't leave the player on the sidelines is absolutely cutting-edge. Instead of overwrought

puzzles and make-work, the game challenges us to navigate a labyrinth of conspiracy and deceit, questioning every character's motives along the way—including our own.

**PUBLISHER** Wadjet Eye Games

**DEVELOPER** Joshua Nuernberger

INDIE GAME OF THE YEAR

# Dungeons of Dredmor

We died from kicking a door down. We gained ludicrous XP from performing feats of "Heroic Vandalism." We foolishly charged into a monster zoo, thinking our Dire Sandwiches could save us. And we paid with our lives. Again and again. But thanks to the creativity and diversity of character traits (rolling a wizard with Flesh-smithing, Fungal Arts, and Necronominconomics, to name just a few), *Dredmor*'s randomized dungeons and perma-deaths are an essential part of the fun, with every grisly demise leading to fresh possibilities and unique stories.

**PUBLISHER** Gaslamp Games

**DEVELOPER** Gaslamp Games

ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR

# Batman: Arkham City

Outside the confines of Arkham Asylum Batman has, quite literally, the freedom to soar. After proving that it had the imagination and skill to make administering Batman's signature rough justice to Gotham City's worst a thrilling videogame experience, Rocksteady aimed even higher in the wide-open world of *Batman: Arkham City*. The result is a superhero game that convincingly immerses you not only into the being, but also the psyche of a lethal vigilante who—let's face it—gets off on terrorizing his prey.

**PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Interactive

**DEVELOPER** Rocksteady

## FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER OF THE YEAR (SINGLE-PLAYER)

# Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Most games manage to slip in a spectacular set-piece or two into the action: *Modern Warfare 3* strings them together like bullets on a bandolier. Completing a mission in the middle of a sun-occluding sandstorm; floating *Inception*-like in the cabin of an airplane as it comes apart while trading rounds in the air; accidentally blowing up the Eiffel Tower; wrecking enemies with a remote-controlled tank. Everything's at stake, there's a clear enemy and a team of men who only speak in catch phrases and military shorthand determined to stop him—it's a trope-filled template, but the spectacle of Europe and New York under attack in *Modern Warfare 3*'s campaign is beautifully tuned action-movie indulgence.

**PUBLISHER** Activision
**DEVELOPER** Infinity Ward

## FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER OF THE YEAR (MULTIPLAYER)

# Red Orchestra 2 Heroes of Stalingrad

Both sides in *Red Orchestra 2*—Axis and Ally—have a unique sprinting animation that reflects the way they were trained to run with a rifle. That isn't realism for realism's sake—it's a useful moving silhouette for distinguishing Fedor from Franz at 200m. In these kinds of details, Tripwire wraps its reverence for WWII history around thoughtful FPS design that rewards those players with the most battlefield awareness.

Detailed damage modeling means enemy bodies don't act like bags of hitpoints, but a body of simulated limbs and organs with specific vulnerabilities. Real bullet behavior is the other side of that; seeing a grey-coat run behind a brick wall, then tagging him in the heart (because you're pretty sure he crouched behind it) honors your skill and intuition as a soldier.

**PUBLISHER** Tripwire Interactive
**DEVELOPER** Tripwire Interactive



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MOD OF THE YEAR

# No More Room in Hell

Derived from the classic, shuffling-zombie template of the George Romero movies, *No More Room in Hell* feels uniquely more like a horror game than an FPS. Every bullet matters, and you can't hold a flashlight and a weapon at the same time (other than your pistol), so illuminating a zombie with your Maglite while a teammate applies his sledge-hammer is typical of the game's excruciatingly tense, realistic teamwork.

**REQUIRES** Source SDK (free)
**DEVELOPER** No More Room in Hell Development Team

UPDATE OF THE YEAR

# League of Legends

MMOs and multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs). A case in point: With only two exceptions in all of 2011, *League of Legends* received a new champion every two weeks, which players could try for free a week after its release.

But it's the capture-point gameplay mode Dominion that takes away this year's prize. While not designed for pro-level tournament play, it solved the biggest question holding the entire genre back: how the hell do we get our casual friends playing with us?

**PUBLISHER** Riot Games
**DEVELOPER** Riot Games

PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR

# Portal 2

*Portal 2* wove humor, drama, adventure, and puzzles into a single tightrope and then led us gracefully across it—and such was the combined strength of these threads that we eventually forgot that we were solving puzzles at all. Instead, we were confronting life-or-death challenges; we were meditating on physics and geometry. And that incomparable experience was followed by yet another: brilliant cooperative play that required precision maneuvering, punished every lapse in teamwork, and carefully cultivated moments of insight that made us rocket out of our chairs and yell "Wait, I GOT IT!"

**PUBLISHER** Valve
**DEVELOPER** Valve

GAME OF THE YEAR and RPG OF THE YEAR

# The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

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You can spend your days hammering steel at the Fireforge, selling off the armor and shields to merchants around Skyrim. You can decorate your home in Whiterun with hundreds of different swords and rare gems and hike lonely mountain paths by night seeking the perfect vantage point to view the Aurora Borealis. You can join the Stormcloaks faction, butchering innocent couriers and draping their corpses over logs to terrify travelers. You can set fire to trees just to watch them burn. You can be an unlovable but unbroken loser.

The game manages to accommodate any and all play styles within its expansive dimensions, and as a result, every quest tells a unique story that follows the contours of your character with all its abilities and deficits. There has been no greater fulfillment of the promise of a role-playing game than *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

**PUBLISHER** Bethesda Game Studios
**DEVELOPER** Bethesda Softworks

# Going Rogue

## Editors pick their own winners

**Logan** Rendered in shades of black and grey with very little sound and a main character who's a blinking silhouette, *Limbo* is nonetheless an emotional, terrifying, unforgettable experience.

**Evan** *Unity of Command*'s *Advance Wars*-like readability is invaluable. It elegantly simplifies supply, terrain, and airstrikes without sacrificing depth. Pour tea and cozy up.

**Chris C** *Might and Magic: Clash of Heroes*' *Bejeweled*-like combat is surprisingly complex and addictive, and its characters recall RPG classics such as *Lunar: The Silver Star* and *Wanderers from Ys*.

**Josh** Nothing tops the actual card game, but *Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012* is the fastest, cheapest way to explore the amazing, endless inventory of *Magic* strategies.

**Tyler** Once I got over the web-based interface and the lack of free server hosting, *Battlefield 3*'s multiplayer was just what I wanted: a big, beautiful, ridiculously goofy war.

**Chris A** *Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon* dumps big-budget storytelling in favor of killing wave after wave of the same six enemies—stupid yet ultra-satisfying fun.

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1989

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# *The Best* Schools for Gaming

**The Top 10 Undergraduate videogame design programs and what makes them so great, as ranked by The Princeton Review.**

## #1 University of Southern California
*Interactive Media Division, Computer Science (Game Development)*

Location: **Los Angeles, CA**

**63** Game-related courses offered this year

**71%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** In addition to sponsored research projects, weekly seminars, and a class focused on networking and skill-sharing, the program also hosts weekly board game nights.

## #2 Massachusetts Institute of Technology
*Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab*

Location: **Cambridge, MA**

**60** Game-related courses offered this year

**100%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** MIT's program is very opposed to crunching, and helps students manage their time and cut features, instead of working more than 8 hours a day on a full-time project.

## #3 University of Utah
*Entertainment Arts & Engineering*

Location: **Salt Lake City, UT**

**27** Game-related courses offered this year

**14%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** Microsoft provided the school with a full Xbox Lab.

## #4 DigiPen Institute of Technology
Location: **Redmond, WA**

**262** Game-related courses offered this year

**85%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** DigiPen is the only school in the world whose students have won awards in the IGF Student Showcase every year since the Showcase began (33 total).

## #5 The Art Institute of Vancouver
*Game Art & Design, Visual & Game Programming, 3D Modeling for Animation & Games, Game Programming BSC*

Location: **Vancouver, BC**

**100** Game-related courses offered this year

**80%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** Over 772 students have graduated from The Art Institute of Vancouver's game-related programs, the second-most of any school on this list.

## #6 Rochester Institute of Technology
*School of Interactive Games & Media*

Location: **Rochester, NY**

**80** Game-related courses offered this year

**50%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** 100 students in Rochester's programs are supported by game-design research funding. The next closest on this list had 20.

## #7 Shawnee State University
*Gaming & Simulation Developement Arts, Digital Simulation & Gaming Engineering Technologies*

Location: **Portsmouth, OH**

**42** Game-related courses offered this year

**66%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** Shawnee was the only school on this list that saw 100% of its 2011 undergraduates take a job in some aspect of game development by the time they graduated.

## #8 Savannah College of Art & Design
*Interactive Design & Game Devolopement*

Location: **Savannah, GA**

**70** Game-related courses offered this year

**64%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** Savannah was one of only two schools on this list that teaches all 12 technologies The Princeton Review asks about.

## #9 University of New Mexico
*Advanced Graphics Lab Games Division*

Location: **Albuquerque, NM**

**15** Game-related courses offered this year

**80%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** Students work towards creating an entire game, which must be completed and released to the public via platforms like Xbox Live and Apple's iStore.

## #10 Becker College
*BA in Interactive Entertainment: Game Design & Game Programming*

Location: **Worchester, MA**

**22** Game-related courses offered this year

**20%** of 2011 Graduates have worked on a shipped game

**Fun Fact:** All of their gaming faculty have started, run, or worked for a game.

## The Honorable Mentions

• **Michigan State University** *Specialization in Game Design & Development* • **WPI** *Interactive Media & Game Development* • **Northeastern University** *Creative Industries* • **Drexel University** *Drexel Game Design* • **Champlain College** *The Game Studio at Champlain College* • **Univ. of California, Santa Cruz** *Bachelor of Science Computer Science: Computer Game Design* • **The University of Texas at Dallas** *Arts & Technology* • **Georgia Institute of Technology** *Computational Media* • **North Carolina State University** *Computer Science* • **Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute** *Games & Simulation Arts & Sciences* • **DePaul University** *Computer Game Development* • **Ferris State University** *Digital Animation & Game Design* • **New York University/NYU POLY** *Games @ NYU* • **Vancouver Film School** *Game Design* • **Full Sail University** *Game Development* • **Ohio University** *Games & Animation* • **Miami University** *Armstrong Institute for Interactive Media Studies* • **Columbia College Chicago** *Game Design/Interactive Arts & Media* • **University of Maryland, Baltimore County** *GAIM* • **Bradley University** *Game Design, Computer Game Technology* • **New Jersey Institute of Technology** *Information Technology, Digital Design* • **University of Advancing Technology**

# design reigns.

scad.edu/interactive-design-and-game-development

Philip Liu, M.A. visual effects student, Naperville, Illinois; Joey Lenz, M.A. visual effects student, Ash Grove, Missouri; *Aetheral Temple*

The SCAD interactive design and game development graduate program was ranked one of the top U.S. programs by the Princeton Review in 2011.

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# The Top 10 Graduate videogame design programs and what makes them so great, as ranked by The Princeton Review.

## #1 University of Southern California

*Interactive Media Division, Computer Science (Game Development) Masters*

Location: **Los Angeles, CA**

**PhD** highest degree offered

**$75k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** USC was one of the few schools that offers courses in all 17 fields of study surveyed for (and 3 more on top of that!).

## #2 Rochester Institute of Technology

*School of Interactive Games & Media*

Location: **Rochester, NY**

**Masters** highest degree offered

**$55k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** 100 students in Rochester's programs are supported by game-design research funding. The next closest on this list had 20.

## #3 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

*Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab*

Location: **Cambridge, MA**

**PhD** highest degree offered

**$65k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** MIT has the only graduate program on this list whose faculty all have PhDs.

## #4 University of Central Florida

*Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy*

Location: **Orlando, FL**

**Masters** highest degree offered

**$51k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** One of the cornerstones of UCF's program is working in teams. Grad students are paired up with other artists, programmers, and producers on their first day.

## #5 Southern Methodist University

*The Guildhall at SMU*

Location: **Plano, TX**

**Masters** highest degree offered

**$60k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** By the time they graduate, students will have a portfolio of at least three functional games.

## #6 Carnegie Mellon University

*Entertainment Technology Center*

Location: **Plano, TX**

**Masters** highest degree offered

**$55k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** Over 500 students have graduated from CMU's videogame design graduate programs.

*of gaming graduates who accepted employment by 3 months after graduation

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## #7 Savannah College of Art & Design

*Interactive Design & Game Developement*
Location: **Savannah, GA**

**Masters** highest degree offered

**$56k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** This campus has some awesome facilities to help game design students, including a full motion-capture facility and multiple green screens.

## #8 DigiPen Institute of Technology

*Master of Science in Computer Science*
Location: **Redmond, VA**

**Masters** highest degree offered

**N/A** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** With 30 gaming faculty, Digipen has the most of any school on this list.

## #9 University of California, Santa Cruz

*Department of Computer Science & Digital Arts New Media*
Location: **Santa Cruz, CA**

**PhD** highest degree offered

**$63k** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** Their library has over 685 computer games and over 40 game consoles for students to rent.

## #10 Drexel University

*Drexel Game Design*
Location:
**Philadelphia, PA**

**PhD** highest degree offered

**N/A** mean base salary*

**Fun Fact:** Drexel aims to have its production courses mirror industry practices, even going so far as to have grades tied to a milestone/payment system that uses virtual currency.

*of gaming graduates who accepted employment by 3 months after graduation

## Three Big Games

*that graduates from these schools went on to make.*

**League of Legends**
**School:** University of Southern California
**Alumni:** Jeffrey Jew, Associate Producer at Riot Games

**Halo**
**School:** Savanah College of Art and Design
**Alumni:** CJ Cowan, Story Design Lead at Bungie Studios

**Portal**
**School:** DigiPen Institute of Technology
**Alumni:** Kim Swift, now Creative Director at Airtight Games

## The Honorable Mentions

• **University of Utah** *Entertainment Arts & Engineering Master Game Studio* • **The University of Texas at Dallas** *Arts and Technology* • **DePaul University** *Computer Game Development* • **Parsons The New School for Design** *MFA Design & Technology* • **NYU/NYU Poly** *Games @ NYU* • **Georgia Institute of Technology** *Digital Media* • **Sacred Heart University** *Game Design & Development* • **Full Sail University** *Game Design Master of Science*

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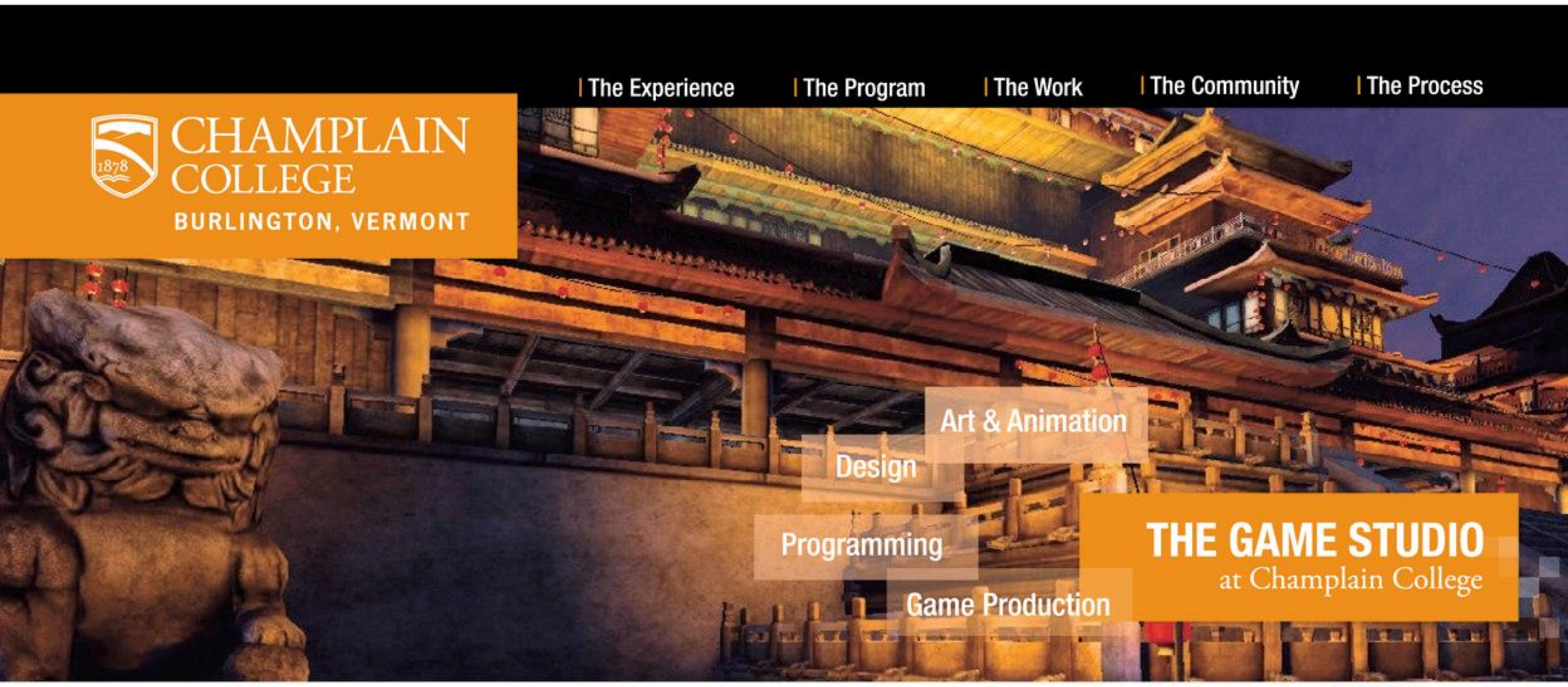


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gamestudio.champlain.edu

# REVIEWS

## Need to know

**What is it?**
A globe-spanning civilian flight sim with unique "blade element" flight modeling.

**Influenced by**
Austin Meyer's background in aeronautics

**Play it on**
3GHz dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce GTX 480/ Radeon HD 4870

**Alternatively**
*FSX*, 86%

**Copy protection**
Disc check

**_X-Plane_ is more of a hobby than a game.**



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# PLANE CRAZY

**X-PLANE 10** only comes with one level, but it's 196,937,429 mi² in size ***by Tim Stone***

The eight DVDs' worth of scenery files have been installed, the joystick has been configured, and the cat has been fed. The moment has come.

Excitedly, I type the name of my local aerodrome into *X-Plane 10*'s search box and press "GO TO THIS AIRPORT." A minute or two passes, then one of the dullest splash screens I've ever seen dissolves to reveal...

Hmm.

Lifting the camera high above the raised wing of a handsome US Army Stinson L-5, I see hills draped with field textures stretching to a distant horizon. What I don't see is a single 3D tree or building. I check the scenery settings. As I thought: "airport detail" is set at "totally insane," "number of objects" at "tons." In vanilla *FSX* this bucolic Hampshire strip looked like it was situated in a wooded corner of Tuscany. *X-Plane* makes it look like it's in the middle of a deserted Hebridean isle. I think I prefer the Tuscany version.

Then again, in *FSX* I don't remember the hill fort on the southern edge of the airfield looking quite so hilly, or the downland ridge to the east looking nearly so pronounced. Perhaps those hours of scenery installation were worth it after all. Let's see what the land looks like from the air.

As the Stinson bumps along the undulating turf and hauls itself into a breezy summer sky, I spot something I've never seen in any iteration of *Flight Simulator*—the little path that runs along the northern perimeter of the field. I begin to follow the tarmac squiggle. An hour later I land back where I started with a quite different opinion of the sim's scenic strength.

While Laminar Research's new autogen scenery system leaves large tracts of the globe balder than a baboon's butt, it makes central London look like suburban Los Angeles, and occasionally puts bridges and electricity pylons where they have no business being. Its use of detailed highway data and fine elevation mesh means low-level VFR (Visual Flight Rules) navigation is actually a far more practical prospect than it is in an unaugmented install of *FSX*. You won't see your house in *X-Plane 10*—you might not even see your village or suburb—but there's a very good chance you will see your road, avenue, or lane.

The fact that Austin Meyer and chums haven't found the time to add hangars and towers to every tin-pot airfield isn't a great surprise. What's a little disappointing is that the sim's representation of major airports and capitals is still far below the *FSX* benchmark. Weary passengers stepping out of their Jumbos at JFK or Heathrow will find tracts of bare concrete where terminals should be. I can pop along to www.x-plane.org and download decent user-made solutions, but the new autogen code really should have been savvy enough to slap down some generic structures as a stopgap.

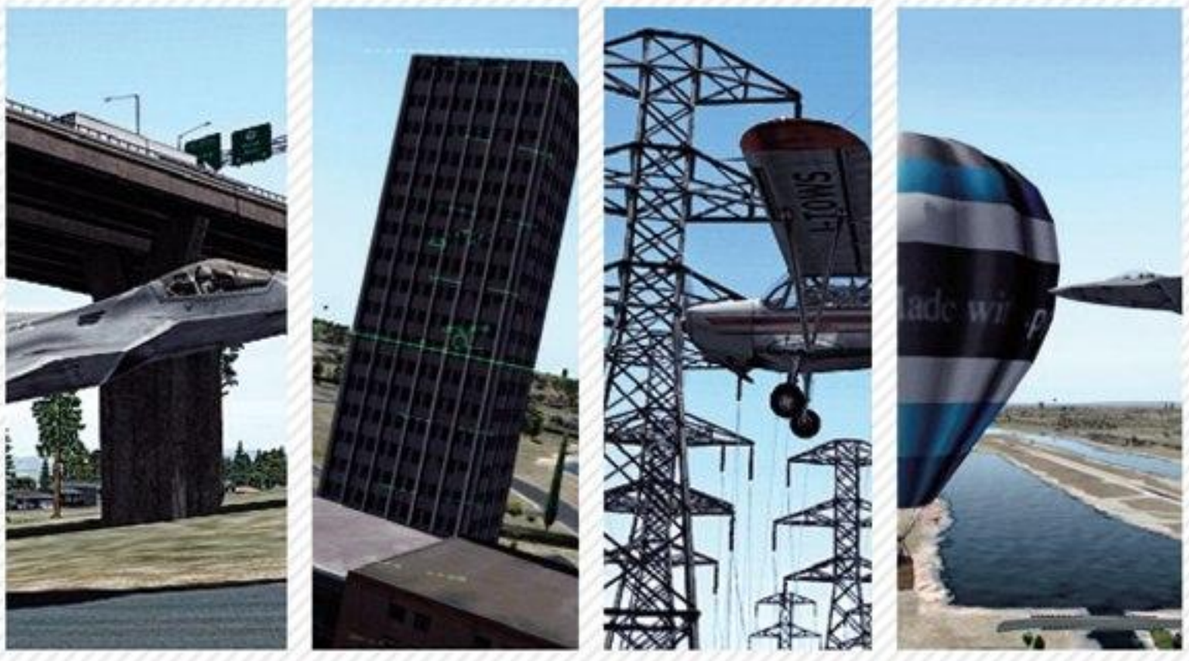
## Under control

Oh well, at least the invisible control towers have invisible ATC (Air Traffic Controllers) inside them at long last. After the scenery and graphics progress, this edition's most substantive improvements are its AI traffic and interactive ATC. In the past, playing offline was lonely business. The closest you came to interaction was accidentally mincing a migrating goose with your prop or turbofan. In *X-Plane 10* you can wave at passing planes (though there are never more than a handful of these aloft at any one time) and exchange pleasantries with several different types of tin pusher.

I say "exchange pleasantries" because the text-based ATC menu only lets you file IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) flight-plans and request clearances. It's a more realistic treatment than Microsoft's (you must manually tune radios at each stage of

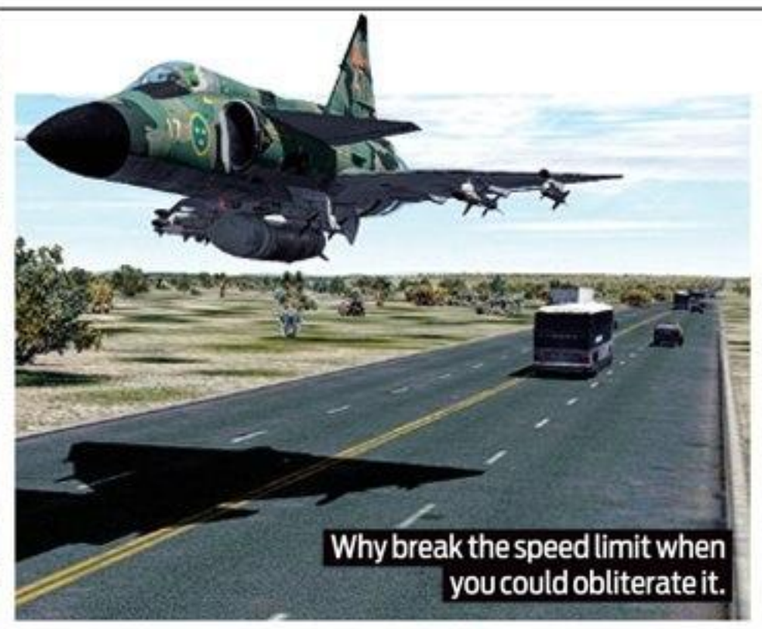
### Low-level perils

Which of these hazards pose the most danger?



**Answer:** They're all equally harmless. Sadly, only *terra firma* detects collisions at the moment.

Stone's Stonebaked Pizzas deliver anywhere.


Why break the speed limit when you could obliterate it.

*X-Plane*'s bosses slay you with avionics.

a journey which means consulting maps and fiddling with small dials). It's also a little less reliable. Aircraft controllers will occasionally lapse into sulky silences or infuriating repetition. At times you'll be told to taxi in circles or trundle through waiting aircraft.

Considering Laminar doesn't have an impatient publisher breathing down its neck, the number of gremlins in this release is startling. In addition to those ATC meltdowns, I endured three or four crashes to desktop a day, and awful bugs such as ruined saves and corrupt plane files.

## X-Plane nation

Buying an edition of *X-Plane* isn't like buying the latest iteration of *FS*. You're effectively purchasing the sim plus the next few years' worth of updates and improvements. By the time version 11 touches down, many of the issues highlighted in this review will have vanished like wind-combed vapor trails.

The question is: will you have vanished too? Does *X-Plane 10* have enough going for it to warrant a few months of stiff-upper-lip stoicism? If you're a *Microsoft Flight Sim* user still bitter about *FSX*'s feeble framerates, the answer is a clear "aye." Though the swiftness that characterized the indie pretender in its early days has been sacrificed on the altar of autogen and fancy rendering, it still outperforms its plodding peer in most circumstances. How much of this edge is down to cannier coding, and how much is down to emptier vistas, it's hard to say.

For PC pilots searching for planes that handle exactly like their real-world equivalents, the decision is more difficult. *X-Plane* uses blade element theory to determine its flight models. Put crudely, the way an aircraft behaves is determined by the shape of its 3D model and the output of its engine, rather than a table of scrupulously researched data. While this unusual approach together with the sim's bundled plane editor (not for the faint of heart) is a boon for aspiring aircraft designers, its benefits to the realism-hungry simmer are questionable. Because CPUs still struggle to model the air flows swirling round fuselages and airfoils, and modelers don't always replicate every dimple and protuberance on those fuselages and airfoils, *X-Plane*'s Cessna 172 and Beechcraft Baron don't necessarily fly more plausibly than FSX's Cessna 172 and Beechcraft Baron.

As in Microsoft Aces' swan song, many of your finest flying experiences are likely to come via payware and freeware add-ons. Though the large default hangar houses some fine machines (the new Jumbo and Stinson are especially lovely) a lot of its exotic inmates are inherited from older versions, and have, frankly, seen better days. For each of these, at least, *X-Plane* features sophisticated malfunction modeling. Almost every element of a plane is vulnerable to random and critical failures.

Sim novices may not cleave to *X-Plane*. Nor will players who like their aviation structured and spiced with adventure. There are no formal tutorials in *X-Plane* and the closest thing to scenarios are called situations. With a couple of clicks you can set up a carrier or oil rig approach, fight a forest fire, or attempt mid-air refueling. Once you've tired of these sideshows, the assumption is that you'll spend most of your time making your own fun by gallivanting around the globe on self-generated sorties.

It's a reasonable assumption. With an entire Earth to roam—an Earth enveloped by Laminar's fluid/fearsome weather fronts—and an Aladdin's aerodrome of user-made content waiting to for use, *X-Plane 10* is more of a hobby than a game.

Is it a better sim than *FSX*? Possibly not, but choosing between these two winged wonders is becoming increasingly tricky. ■

**The number of gremlins in this release is startling.**

◆ **Price** $80 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Laminar Research ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** LAN, internet ◆ **Link** www.x-plane.com ◆ **ESRB** E

### VERDICT

Plenty of progress, especially in the areas of graphics and air traffic control, but don't toss aside Microsoft's *FSX* yet.

PC GAMER **78**



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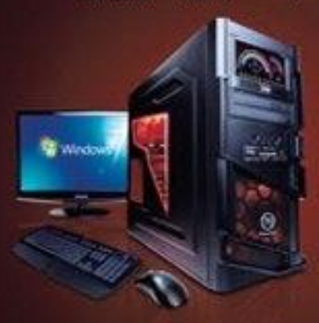

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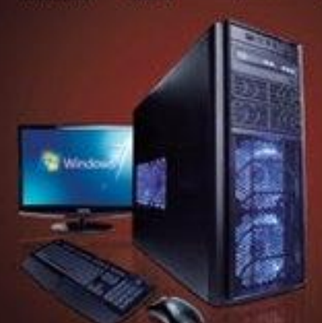

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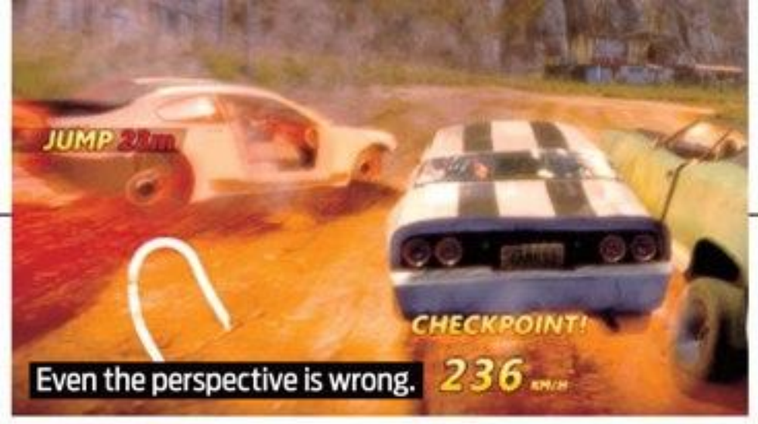

Even the perspective is wrong.

Cars: good at going fast, not so good at climbing trees.

Enjoy your tires' traction while it lasts.

This happens a lot.

T-boned!

# FLATLINE

## FLATOUT 3: CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION?

More like dead loss and frustration ***by Henry Winchester***

### Need to know

**What is it?**
A chaotic, demolition-based racer.

**Influenced by**
*Flatout 2, Carmageddon*

**Play it on**
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8600 or ATI X2600

**Alternatively**
*Flatout Ultimate Carnage* (82%)

**Copy protection**
Steam

Just 20 yards into my first race in *Flatout 3: Chaos and Destruction* I'm stuck between a girder and a wall underneath a bridge. No amount of acceleration or reversing can free me from this steel-and-asphalt trap. As I watch my opponents speed by, I realize with dismay that I actually prefer it this way.

*Chaos and Destruction* has been developed by Team 6 rather than *Flatout*'s original developer BugBear, and they've thrown in just about every racing mode imaginable as if to apologize for the switch. There's a bog-standard race, a demolition derby, a challenge mode, a rainy night mode, a monster truck mode, a speed racing mode, an offroad mode and the series' signature stunt man mode. And they all unequivocally suck.

Team 6 seems to have based the driving model in all modes on a 30-year-old bumper car. The simple act of steering sends your car reeling in completely random trajectories, sometimes nudging the car a few degrees, and other times sending it flying across the track. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but braking usually brings your vehicle to a halt. Here, it sends your car frictionlessly arcing around the course like a giant, metal air-hockey puck.

Crashing is incredibly easy, and not in a good way. Whereas the previous *Flatout* games used big, wide streets to provide impromptu demolition derbies, here the tracks are far tighter. One slip of the steering wheel and you careen into what inevitably proves to be a strangely immovable object, totaling your ride. Sometimes you'll respawn on top of other cars, and other times it's race over.

Surfaces apparently make no difference to your car's speed either. One level—set in the Coliseum—features the most useless, perfunctory grass in the world. In this level, the AI cars seemed content to hump the ancient rocks provided as scenery, leaving me free to ram them into oblivion. AI vehicles are similarly suicidal on other tracks, often driving themselves into lakes or taking shortcuts to nowhere.

*Flatout*'s stuntman mode—in which your driver is launched from his car into a variety of targets—is replicated awfully. In the first games, these were overblown showcases in grand arenas, but here they're reduced to obtuse hidden target hunting. I was able to complete each and every one of them by launching my driver out of the car and then dragging his quivering corpse around using the under-used Aftertouch feature.

The original *Flatout* games proved an anarchic, if slight, diversion from the over-seriousness of the modern racer. But *Chaos and Destruction*'s unremitting awfulness drains all the joy and fun from the franchise, leaving a hollow shell of a paint-by-numbers racer. When smashing your multi-thousand-horsepower vehicle head on and full pelt into another racer feels flat and empty, you know something's gone wrong. ■

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Strategy First ◆ **Developer** Team 6
◆ **Multiplayer** 24 players (if you can find them) ◆ **Link** www.strategyfirst.com

### VERDICT

This is an immense disservice to the *Flatout* franchise, and one that makes *Flatout 2* look like a vehicular ballet.

PC GAMER 28


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# THE ART OF GORE

## Need more Mori or ickier Ikko Ikki? **SHOGUN 2**'s **DLC** can help *by Tim Stone*

Hacking people to death is a messy business, and you can get an idea of just how messy with *Shogun 2*'s *Blood Pack*.

Where lethal spear lunges and cool katana *coups-de-grâce* previously killed as discreetly as poison-tipped umbrellas, they now sometimes coax camera-spattering crimson fountains and in rare cases even detach heads and limbs.

Some claim this panders to the basest urges of its target audience. They have a point. Then again, they also have the choice not to buy it. I'm more than happy to pay $1.60 to take the game from a T to an M rating.

Whether you're willing to shell out for the *Hattori Clan Pack* depends on whether you consider ninjas a delight or a distraction. The Hattori are the slyest faction. Their seedy sake dens produce naturally gifted ninja agents, and their criminal syndicates enable unusually-able battlefield Kishos. $5 seems fair for the pleasure of their covert company.

Just as characterful are the Ikko Ikki, another $5 DLC faction. This monkish power doesn't boast any particular weapon specialities or especially striking warriors, but enmeshed in its skill trees and unit selection are morale advantages and commander talents that ensure distinctive expansion.

The one *Shogun* DLC I'm less enthusiastic about is the focusless *Sengoku Jidai Pack*. This $3.25 chocolate box adds a new fighter to each faction. I have enough problems employing existing troops without hand mortar teams, bulletproof samurai, and long-yari ashigaru thickening the broth. ■

PC GAMER **76**

Kyoto is tantalizingly close to Hattori and Ikko Ikki homelands.

Shortly after Kenji lost his head, he lost his head.

◆ **Price** $1 to $5 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sega ◆ **Developer** The Creative Assembly ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 8 players ◆ **Link** totalwar.com/shogun2 ◆ **ESRB** T/M

# INEXORABLE

## Can **X3: ALBION PRELUDE**'s massive lasers add excitement? *by Tom Senior*

The *Albion Prelude* expansion to *X3: Terran Conflict* adds a healthy dose of war to the exploration and free-form trading sim, along with 30 new ships and a dynamic stock exchange.

The tension between human colonists and the alien races has finally ignited, triggering a massive space war. Hungry corporations are taking advantage of the unrest, and there's plenty of room for an entrepreneurial lone trader to make millions.

The lone trader is one of the premade starting profiles that present different angles on the conflict. You can sign up as a fighter in the army, become a well-funded intelligence agent, or even a space pirate desperate to scrape out a living.

Unfortunately, the ambition of *Albion Prelude* is undermined by the tedium and plodding pace of every action. As a trader, the act of docking, loading up and shifting my goods around to take advantage of a gap in the market took so long I often forgot what I was doing.

The space battles are much better, and act as a great showcase for the considerable graphical updates. The campaign objectives get repetitive quickly, however, and there's almost no guidance. When one battle went bad, I headed for the nearest stargate and deserted for a life of piracy. An hour later I was lost in the void, still trying to find the first rung on the galactic trading ladder.

If you're willing to put up with the pace, *Albion Prelude* is the most dynamic and interesting sandbox in the *X* series. If interacting with it weren't such a pain, it would be a tremendous achievement. ■

PC GAMER **69**

Sights like this help to compensate for the slow pace.

You'll find that space is as big as it is vastly large.

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Egosoft ◆ **Developer** Egosoft ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** http://bit.ly/y2nyPa ◆ **ESRB** T

# SPOTLESS

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

## Platforming polished to perfection in DUSTFORCE *by Lucas Sullivan*

### Need to know

**What is it?**
Custodial platforming with a depth that demands your best efforts.

**Influenced by**
*N+*, the Planeteers from *Captain Planet*

**Play it on**
Core 2 Duo CPU, 1GB RAM, Geforce 8800

**Alternatively**
*Super Meat Boy* (90%)

**Copy protection**
Steam

Playing *Dustforce* whisks me away to some of my fondest and most formative gaming memories, when every ounce of my being was devoted to full completion of *Donkey Kong Country 2* on my dingy Super Nintendo. Today, I'm grown up and paying off bills, but the elements that make a great platformer are pretty much the same. Sublime music, well thought-out controls, gorgeous graphics, and accessibility that scales into supreme difficulty—*Dustforce* possesses all these traits in glorious abundance.

As a member of the titular team of spry sweepers (which includes a vacuum-wielding geezer and a triple-jumping lass with feather-duster pom-poms), you're charged with banishing colorful dust and debris in over 50 levels. Dirty floors will be spotless once you've swept past them, but elsewhere, grime will require a more aggressive approach with a quick smack from your broom. The scattered soot pays off in two ways: cleaning every smidgen of dust in a full combo awards you with a flawless S ranking for the level's Completion and Finesse ratings. But while you're still learning the optimal path for traversing the elaborate stages, the dust-, leaf-, trash-, and ooze-covered surfaces act as a guide for how to tackle each jump and wall-run.

### Jumping janitors

At first glance, most players will immediately associate the nimble maneuvering of *Dustforce* with the brutal-yet-lovable *Super Meat Boy*—but they're actually opposite sides of the same "blissful platforming" coin. Instead of *SMB*'s anxious intensity, frantic music, and merciless difficulty, *Dustforce* takes a more calm, almost meditative approach (backed up by soothing, ethereal background music that mitigates frustrating death streaks). Fluid animations and beautifully stylized character designs also contribute to the zen of janitorial service.

You've also got more movement options at your disposal than typical running and jumping—mid-air dashing and downhill acceleration are crucial to clocking the fastest times. Coming to grips with the controls is initially daunting—but master them, and you'll feel at one with your custodian of choice.

Each level has plenty of checkpoints, and at first, you don't need perfect execution to advance, which goes a long way toward cushioning the effort some levels take to master. But to unlock later stages in the entirely non-linear hub world, you'll need to ace some runs for keys. Faultless play can be a bear to pull off, but by the time you reach the most demanding stages, *Dustforce* will have given you plenty of training. And the hub world is a stage all unto itself, letting you freely explore and discover craftily-hidden doorways—provided you're adept enough to reach them.

Pro gamers can mop the floor with the competition via the online leaderboards, with replays for every entry to see who's got the swiftest Swiffer. There's also plenty of fun to be had in the local multiplayer (provided you've got three buddies nearby)—you get the chance to spread the filth instead of sweep it in chaotic, *Smash Bros*-esque romps.

Once you've traversed enough levels and embedded yourself in the rich atmosphere of *Dustforce*, you'll appreciate how it distinguishes itself from equally brilliant platformers like *Braid* and *Limbo*: rather than putting a new spin on sidescrolling, it spit-shines the core mechanics to near-perfection. The payoff: an exhilarating sense of kinetic agility. ■

### Embrace the strange

Here's Lucas' freakish stance for playing *Dustforce*, which he claims is "just like an SNES controller." Whether you're using the keyboard, a gamepad, or this unholy posture, these are the buttons you'll need.

**Master the controls, and you'll feel at one with your custodian of choice.**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Indie ◆ **Developer** Hitbox Team
◆ **Multiplayer** 4-player local ◆ **Link** www.dustforce.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

### VERDICT

Style and intelligently scaled difficulty make *Dustforce* an instant classic, and a lesson in the rewards of hard work.

PC GAMER 90



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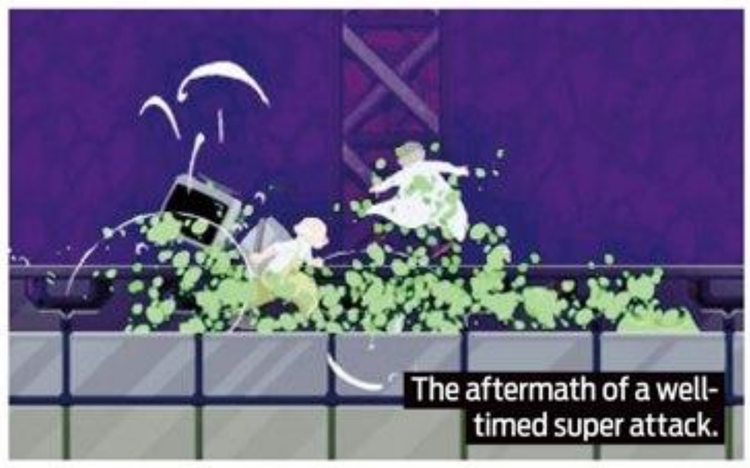
The lush hub world doesn't require cleaning, but it begs to be explored.

Heavy attacks give a pleasant *thwack* when they connect.

In the future, traffic cones will double as deadly spikes.

Purple thorns are nature's way of saying "step off."



The aftermath of a well-timed super attack.

Don't worry—that racoon's about to land safely atop a pillow.

Even gothic towers need a good dusting once in a while.

# EDGY

Go searching for meaning in **DEAR ESTHER**, on the most existential island in the Hebrides ***by Chris Thursten***

## Need to know

**What is it?**
First-person tragi-fiction, and the remake of a well-regarded *Half-Life 2* mod.

**Influenced by**
Loneliness, loss, despair

**Play it on**
Dual-core CPU, GeForce 8800 GTX, 4GB RAM

**Alternatively**
*The Dark Descent* (88%)

**Copy protection**
Steam

You wander the cliffs, caves and sheep pens of a windswept Hebridean island. A single voice reads out fragments of letters, and through these you gain snatches of information about the island and the people who took a walk similar to yours.

Their stories bleed into each other: the travel writer who visited the island in pursuit of a legendary hermit. The shepherd stranded here without friends or family, whose situation reflects the hermit's. *Dear Esther* is about heavy subjects: isolation and tragedy tie the island's visitors together.

It began life as a *Half-Life 2* mod that preferred story to shooting. It was praised for the way it adapted first-person exploration to tell a complex tale of grief, illness and loss. Its hour-long playing time and experimental ambitions were a natural fit for a mod, but it remains mesmerizing as a paid-for game.

The island contains clues both material—an abandoned home, a shipwreck—and abstract, in the form of markings that adorn the walls of cliffs and luminous caves. To the game's credit, there's no *Lost*-style magic answer lurking somewhere: what you're exploring are the emotional consequences of a tragedy that happened in modern-day Britain, played out against a mysterious but grounded backdrop. The only thing you shoot is thoughtful looks at your monitor.

## Telling stories

The game always starts with a letter to the Esther of the title, but the next chunk of spoken text varies, and the game spits out different soliloquies as you meander between the island's sequential areas. *Dear Esther* doesn't ask for much physical input, but the story it has to tell wouldn't work in any other medium: while the basic facts don't change, randomization can substantially change the emphasis. Connect the strands of information, invest yourself in the sketched plot, and your brain will fill-in the rest as the island takes on an ethereal reality.

*Dear Esther* never asks you to solve a puzzle to progress, and it's better for it. You can stop to untangle the cryptic meaning of a circuit diagram that's been scrawled onto a cave wall, but there's no powered-down door that requires you to do so.

As a game, it will draw criticism from those uninterested in narrative for not challenging the player: for all the evocative atmosphere, it's still an hour of wandering around. But the lack of puzzles is crucial to the experience. With puzzles, it would just be a slightly more depressing *Myst*. Without puzzles, the haunting graphics and narrative are allowed to take precedence.

*Dear Esther*'s level design makes the game. Here, something as mundane as a lonely cottage on a hillside can end up lodged deeper in your gaming memory than the dragons and spaceships of countless other games. The script also deserves accolades. It charts a course through vastly different topics—folklore, the Bible, shepherding, travel writing, guilt and medicine—and turns them into something meaningful without speaking down to its audience.

*Dear Esther* provokes thought and feeling in a way few other games do. Stripped down to its constituent parts, there's very little game here at all. But it's a story that only games give us the freedom to hear. ■

## No going back

*Esther*'s environmental art has left the mod far behind

**The jetty**
This is where it all begins. The remake pushes the draw distance back to hint at crucial locations to come.

**Debris**
The wreckage on the shoreline is not only more substantial, but now includes a few extra secrets.

**Caves**
Brighter and more colorful, the island's caves have lost none of their mystery and menace.

**All you'll shoot is thoughtful looks at your monitor.**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** thechineseroom ◆ **Developer** thechineseroom ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.dear-esther.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

## VERDICT

A trip through a brilliantly conceived landscape that rewards attentive engagement with a moving story.

PC GAMER **84**



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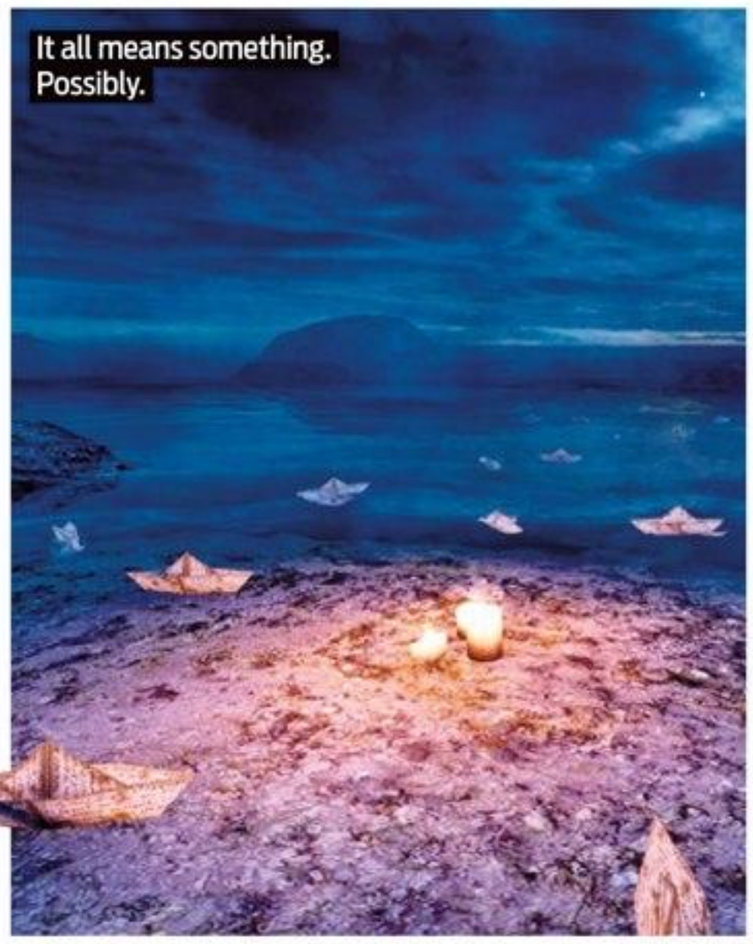
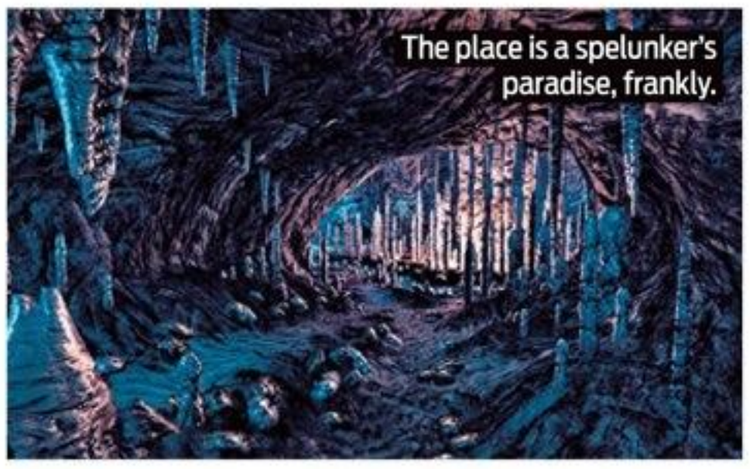
Mysterious caves tempt you underground.

Long-gone shepherds have left a few signs of humanity.

Despite the linear environments, it's surprisingly easy to get lost.


It all means something. Possibly.

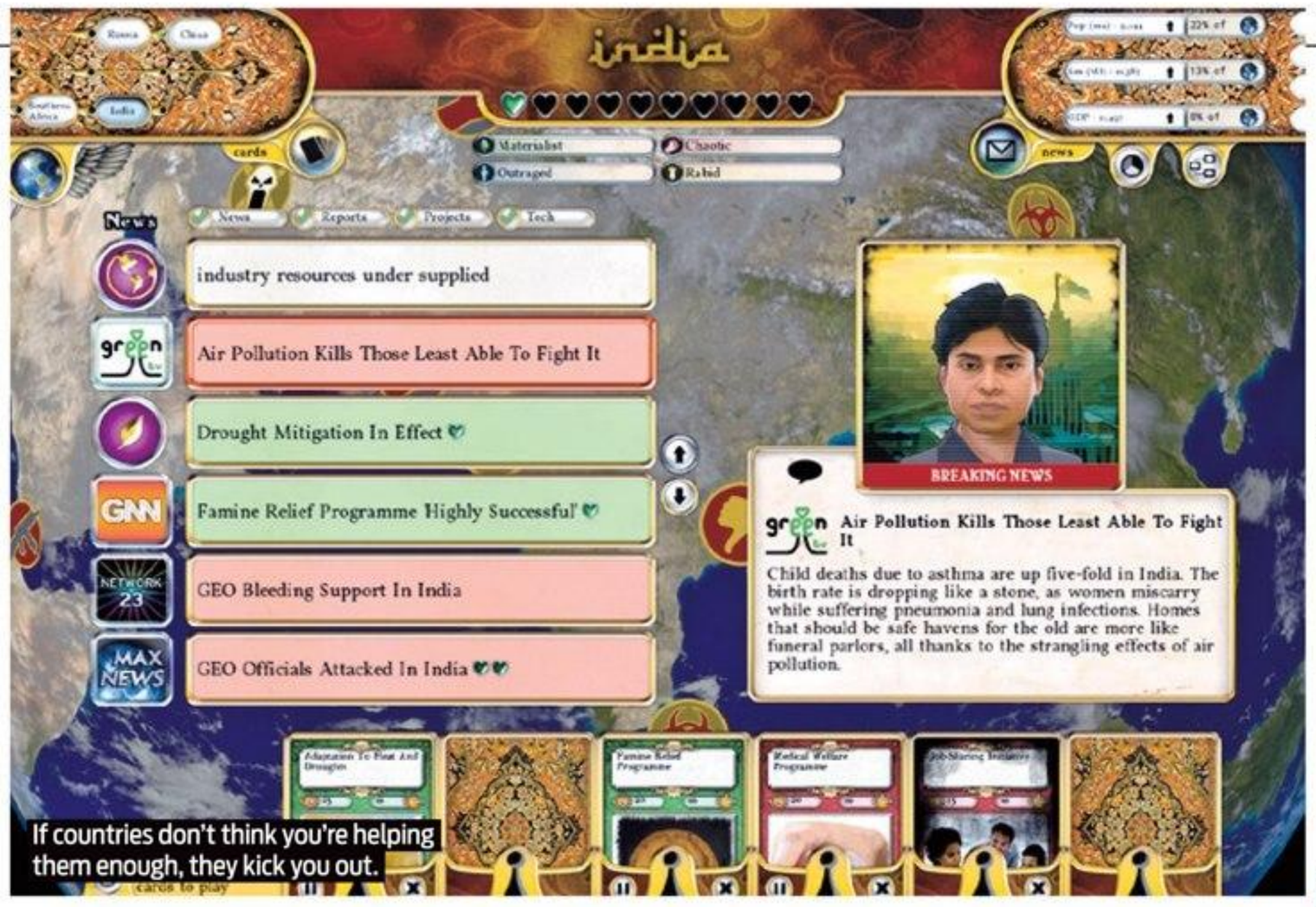
*Dear Esther* begins at dusk, and ends when the sun has set.

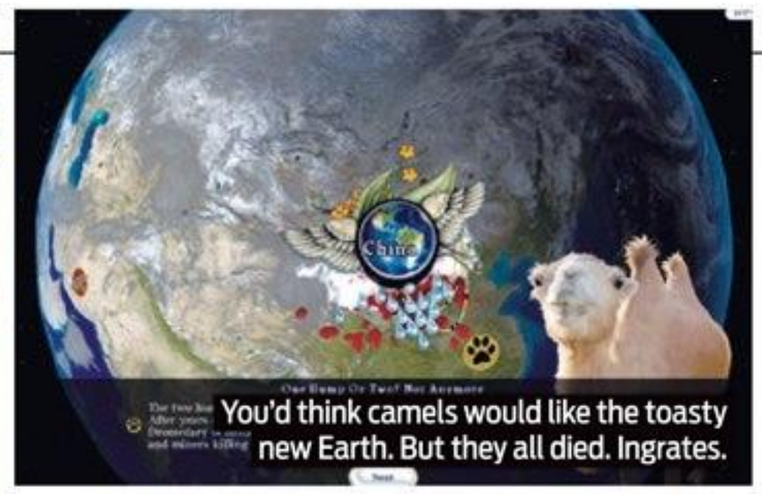

The place is a spelunker's paradise, frankly.

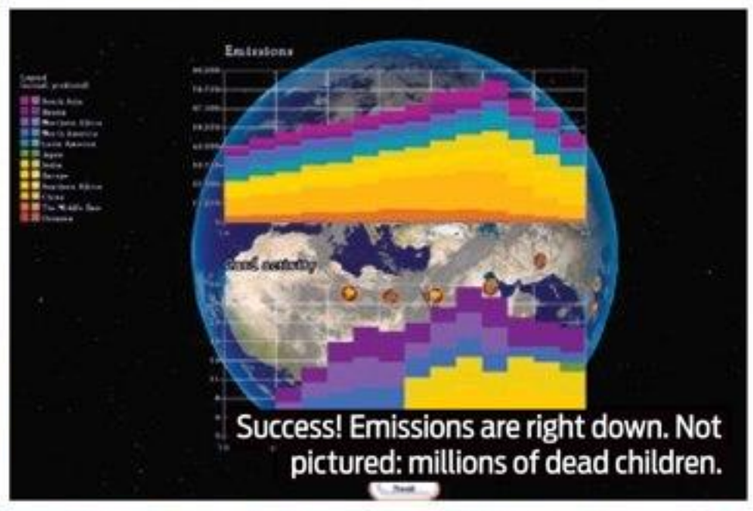
Breathtaking reveals are everywhere.

Each detail is a part of the whole.

Approaching from different angles can reveal secrets.



# FRACKED UP

Oil wells that end well? Not in eco-sim **FATE OF THE WORLD: TIPPING POINT** *by Martin Davies*

## Need to know

**What is it?**
A sim about the world-ending environmental nightmare that will engulf us all.

**Influenced by**
*Global Warming Interactive*, disaster movies

**Play it on**
2.33GHz dual-core CPU, 512MB videocard, 2GB RAM

**Alternatively**
*Defcon* (83%)

**Copy protection**
Steam

This is the way the world ends: not with a bang but with a protracted series of bangs, accompanied by famines, screaming winds, droughts, tsunamis, and your lynching at the hands of a mob.

That's according to this tweaked, expanded re-release of 2011's global suicide strategy simulation and its DLC campaigns. A complex web of depressing data sets (global temperatures, unemployment, infant mortality rates, and so on) have been crunched together to form a Megazord of human misery.

Viewing life at a global level, your job is to carefully usher humanity through these trying times. Icecaps melt, Russia erupts into civil war, Japan becomes a swamp and—oh God, why is Africa on fire again?

How do you accomplish this feat of planetary redemption? Well, mostly you don't, and the world burns. However, you can try—and you do this by deploying cards, before advancing five years and discovering that your good intentions caused children to die by the thousands. Cards are many and varied, capable of doing such things as subsidise alternative fuels, defend against extreme weather, or even violently oust hostile regimes. Meanwhile, bundled DLC campaigns cleverly rejig the simulation to introduce refugee crises, or ignore climate change entirely, allowing you to focus on diminishing resources.

Human needs quickly crash into high-minded environmentalism. Put the brakes on polluting industries, and you economically annihilate the developing world. That's a problem because, as a rule, people with dead babies don't give a damn about carbon sequestration. In the end, all your choices really do is feebly massage the model of planetary doom. You may reach the next century a little less dead than otherwise, but the game offers no silver bullet for the problems you're presented with. This may be disheartening, but it's also fascinating.

However, take *Tipping Point* on its merits as a game rather than an interactive roadmap to self-extinction, and it has issues of its own. The initial release was too hard to win, according to some players. Well, that's accurate, said others. *Tipping Point* tries to adjust that with an easy mode—but it fails to help you understand how this web of stats is held together, and which cards pull which levers. UI changes make it slightly simpler to browse through the pages and pages of telemetry, but the game still struggles to underscore the interrelationships.

At its core, *TP* is a comprehensive and depressingly bleak simulation of life on Earth that conveys how difficult it can be to effect change without unintended consequences. Yet *TP*'s desire to be fun often gets in the way of how it presents its data, and vice versa. In the end, it's something of an ugly compromise—but given the impossible choices the game presents you with, perhaps that's only appropriate. ■

◆ **Price** $19 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Red Redemption ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.fateoftheworld.net

## VERDICT

A wonderfully detailed and terrifying sim. Expanded and slightly improved, but still an opaque and cruel game.

PC GAMER **69**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# VIET...NAH

## **7554** leaves you lost in a dense jungle of bugs and bad grammar *by Greg Henninger*

As I slog through the corpse-ridden streets of Dien Bien Phu, my commander screams at me to "prepare for melee" and "support our rears." A bit confused, I run up to breach the door of a French bunker and I'm told to "hold the key to completed." Wait...what?

The lack of English voiceovers forced me to break out my reading glasses, but they didn't help much. Subtitles suffer from the same lack of polish as the rest of the game.

*7554*—a reference to the day the French occupying army surrendered to Vietnamese nationalists, thus ending more than a century of occupation—tries to evoke the struggle of an everyman soldier struggling to reclaim his homeland, but the tedious and broken game mechanics only inspire frustration.

On one particular timed mission, I spent over 30 minutes angrily throwing countless Molotovs in an attempt to burn down a dilapidated wooden bunker that should have burst into flame right away. Instead the surprisingly stalwart bunker refused to catch spark until I hit a needle-thin, invisible trigger spot.

Other serious problems crop up as well: waypoints are consistently misplaced and AI squad mates repeatedly bump into you like needy puppies, messing up your line of fire.

The few enjoyable sequences are lifted straight from past *Call of Duty* games: I kicked down doors in slow motion and spent an entire level taking directions from a senior officer on when to move and who to shoot. Even $12 is too much to ask for what feels like a half-hearted community mod. ■

PC GAMER **43**

◆ **Price** $12 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Emobi Games ◆ **Developer** Emobi Games ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.emobigames.vn ◆ **ESRB** NR

# SUICIDAL SCROLLER

## More smartphone than PC, **CHOPLIFTER HD** is sidescrolling nostalgia *by Andy Mahood*

You have to be old to remember the original *Choplifter* (Apple II old to be exact) but those fitting the profile will wax nostalgic when they load up this reimagined combat helicopter sidescroller. *Choplifter HD* is no graphic tour de force—the Steam release looks more like an iPhone app than a modern PC action game—but, appropriately, inXile has priced it like the former.

15 bucks will let you maneuver armed helicopters (because of the 2D format you don't really *fly* them but rather elevate and propel them in one of two directions) while rescuing hostages, POWs, and assorted innocents. Along the way you evade and blow up all manner of enemy shooters and installations. The visuals and pyrotechnics are decent enough and the lowbrow banter between you and your co-pilot adds humor, but the game's unlock-as-you-go 30-mission single-player campaign (there's no multiplayer or co-op) exhibits serious flaws.

It's a problem of gameplay balance. You'll probably rip through the first dozen or so missions with impunity, but the difficulty ramps up exponentially in some of the later missions, making them all but impossible to complete. Revisiting earlier missions multiple times (to maximize points and unlock more powerful choppers) and then constantly replaying the problem levels until you prevail is the only real solution here, and that gets annoyingly repetitive. It's unfortunate, because this *Groundhog Day* game design significantly impairs what could have been a diverting and sentimental blast from the past. ■

PC GAMER **59**

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** inXile Entertainment ◆ **Developer** inXile Entertainment ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.choplifterhd.com ◆ **ESRB** T

# INSECTICIDE

Games don't come any more bug-ridden than

## EARTH DEFENSE FORCE: INSECT ARMAGEDDON *by Tom Senior*

### Need to know

**What is it?**
Third-person arcade shooter vs. giant swarming insects and giant robots.

**Influenced by**
*Doom*, B-movies

**Play it on**
2GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB 3D card

**Alternatively**
*Serious Sam: BFE* (70%)

**Copy protection**
Steam

According to B-movies, our planet's demise will be caused by one of two things: giant insects, or giant robots. *Earth Defense Force* asks an important question: why not both?

In *EDF*, you save humanity across 15 fairly short levels. Each one drops you into a walled-off section of city a few blocks wide and throws hundreds of enemies your way.

It has plenty in common with the B-movies that inspired it. Boxy city blocks and low-poly monsters provide a dated, low-budget backdrop to the straightforward, repetitive action. You'll mostly be blowing up anthills (giant anthills, naturally), holding points against enemy waves and, in the game's most honest moments, simply wandering through the streets clearing out every giant ant, spider, wasp, and robot you find in the place. Foes attack by fielding a variety of units assembled in huge numbers, so that battles tend to hit an intense sweet spot in which you'll find yourself on the verge of being completely overwhelmed. It's exhausting, but fun.

Playable classes come in multiple flavors, although all are slight variations of vanilla. There's awesome jetpack man with his experimental electric shotguns, decent but boring assault man with access to a wide range of weaponry, sluggish heavy weapons man and annoying support man with an automated deployable turret and a rich, chocolatey center.

### Electric

You can take on each level with a couple of friends, or let the reasonably competent AI take their place, as you gain XP and unlock more weapons. Levels can be replayed to improve scores and unlock more guns, but only obsessive hunters are likely to keep coming back. As gratuitous and satisfying as *EDF*'s fights are, it doesn't take long for the magic to wear off.

In its finest moments, *EDF* assaults you from all angles. Buildings swarming with acid-spitting ants crumble to reveal leaping spiders the size of monster trucks. Ticks the size of dogs try to latch onto you and suck you dry, and all the while robotic warships buzz overhead, pausing every now and then to target you with a laser. There are occasional enormo-bosses too, yet for all the chaos, *EDF* can't help but be predictable.

The aging visuals can't quite deliver on the promise of that "Insect Armageddon" tagline, so *EDF* gradually losses momentum as you become desensitized to the spectacle. Its extensive armory can't stop the rot, and the end result is decidedly shallow. The weapons of each class are effective against different bugs, but everything essentially boils down to strafing, backpedaling and holding down the fire button.

The budget price reflects *EDF*'s shortfalls and makes it a little easier to recommend, but if you're in any way arachnophobic, avoid this like a plague of flesh-eating spiders. ■

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** D3 Publisher ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** Up to three, co-op ◆ **Link** www.edfia.com

### VERDICT

A frenetic, old fashioned monster-blaster best played with friends. Creepy-crawlyphobes, look elsewhere.

PC GAMER 60



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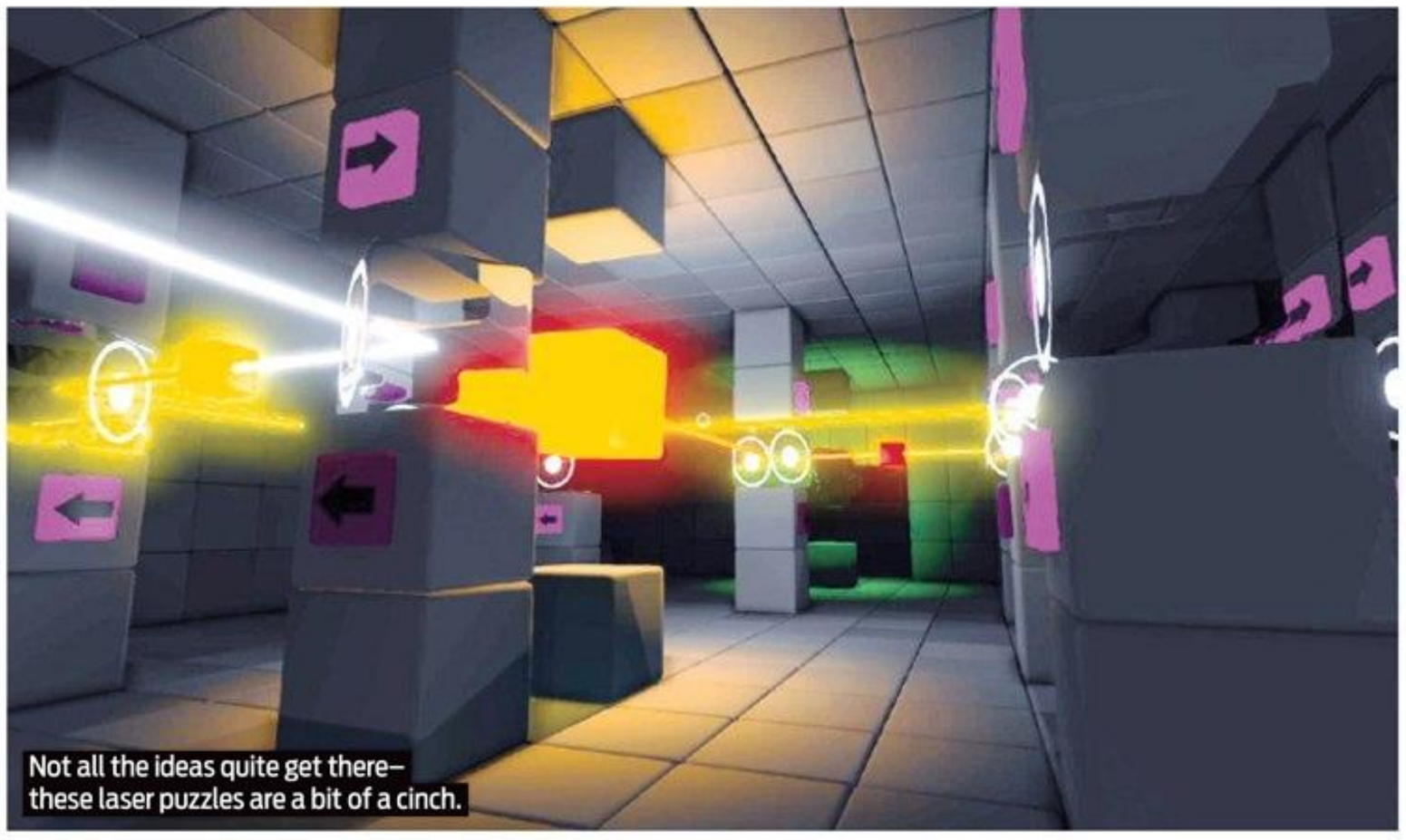

Not all the ideas quite get there—these laser puzzles are a bit of a cinch.

# EXTRUDINARY

## Puzzler **Q.U.B.E.** tries thinking without portals. Apertureless science, so to speak ***by Martin Davies***

Part game, part job application, *Q.U.B.E.* is a first-person spatial puzzler set in a series of austere, white-paneled test chambers that you navigate and escape by way of handheld sci-fi gadgetry. It's a lot like *Portal*. In fact, it's pretty much a handwaving bid to become the next *Narbacular Drop*—the student project that was so delicious its developers were hurriedly slurped up by Valve Corp.

*Q.U.B.E.* doesn't offer anything quite so elegant as the portals themselves, however. Instead, its core conundrum centers on the colored blocks that extrude from the surfaces of its clinical test-chambers. Different colors do different things when activated by line-of-sight. Click on a blue block and it will recess into the floor, popping back out when you walk over it to propel you into the air. Yellow blocks come in a three-pack and elongate in a different height order depending on which block you click first. Red blocks extrude one segment per click. As you hop from one to another and to the exit, it seems a mundane foundation in contrast to *Portal*'s space-splicing gimmickry.

It also takes a little too long for *Q.U.B.E.* to layer-on the complicating factors that make its later levels a formidable challenge: balls that need to be bounced into special zones, lasers that need to pass through crystals of the right color, rooms that need to be rotated like giant, inverted Rubik's cubes.

Some of the most dastardly puzzles introduce magnets that effectively change the gravitational forces acting on free-floating blocks, which you herd into place by extruding different bits of scenery and flipping magnets on and off. It can be a fudge, however, thanks to the way some unseen code massages the laws of physics. A ball will sometimes drop like a dead weight and at other times ricochet. One block will sometimes happily rest on another, while at other times a seemingly innocuous nudge will send it spinning off.

So does it deserve to go on the top of Valve's *curriculum vitae* mountain, or in the pile with the Vortigaunt/G-Man fiction? It's not as good as *Portal*, certainly, and its deference to that game does a good job of constantly reminding you of the fact.

However, it's to *Q.U.B.E.*'s credit that the majority of its flaws feel like limitations of budget, rather than failures of design. The game's wonky art assets and cursory narrative trimming feel like placeholders, but take it as a no-frills *Portal* mod pack and there are ideas here worth winding your brain around—building blocks of a development talent almost as impressive as the game it apes. ■

PC GAMER **75**

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Toxic Games ◆ **Developer** Toxic Games
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.qube-game.com ◆ **ESRB** NR

PC GAMER

## How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

## Our scoring system explained

**0-30% Intolerable**
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

**31-45% Weak**
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

**46-60% Mediocre**
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

**61-75% Fair**
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

**76-89% Good**
Enjoyable, well-made, and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

**90%+ Editor's Choice**
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

## PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

**Star Wars: The Old Republic (93%)**
March 2012

**Unity of Command (84%)**
March 2012

**The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (94%)**
February 2012

**Minecraft (96%)**
February 2012

**Deus Ex: Human Revolution —The Missing Link (90%)**
January 2012

**Orcs Must Die! (90%)**
Holiday 2011

**Bastion (92%)**
December 2011

**Limbo (92%)**
November 2011

**Deus Ex: Human Revolution (94%)**
October 2011

**Jamestown: Legend of the Lost Colony (90%)**
October 2011

# EXTRA LIFE

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CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

# Wing Commander 3: Heart of the Tiger

WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT IF GAMES COULD BE MORE LIKE MOVIES? *by Richard Cobbett*

**It had a then-insane budget of four million dollars and Mark Hamill.**



magazinesdownload.com

Being able to fly *through* your carrier was incredible at the time.

During the 90s, PC gaming caught a disease, and its name was FMV. Fueled by the power to fill CDs with video, and filled with the same starry-eyed dreams of Hollywood that typically end with a naive starlet desperately trying to scour the shame away with a wire brush, the industry set out to not merely make games, but *interactive movies*!

*Wing Commander 3* is one of the very, very few examples where it worked. The series had always had a cinematic flair, with a huge cast of characters, animated sequences for everything from taking off from your fleet carrier to being awarded a medal of bravery for surviving ejecting into space. It had a then-insane budget of four million dollars, a cast headed up by Mark "Luke Skywalker" Hamill, an epic branching storyline, and—this definitely helped a little—jaw-dropping space combat.

## Break and attack

Even now, with the ropey-effects, chunky FMV, and the realization that said combat *really* hasn't aged well, *Wing Commander 3* holds onto a surprising amount of majesty. The opening chords in the soundtrack are powerful and bombastic. Our first scene is of the triumph of series baddies the Kilrathi, and not merely over a group of nameless mooks, but Angel, both lead character Col. Blair's lover, and one of the series' most prominent pilots from the very start. Everything you see is in service of one single statement: *Wing Commander 3* means business.

What makes it interesting now though is how it tells its story. Beat-for-beat, it's a collection of fairly generic sci-fi clichés connected with space battles. Rarely however has such a cinematic game served up such an intentionally depressing tone. Earth is losing the war. Blair, heroic and dedicated to the fight as he is, is visibly on the edge of exhaustion after a lifetime spent fighting the same endless war, and all-too aware that the most his heroism and sacrifices have achieved is to buy humanity a little more time to ponder its inevitable demise. It's no coincidence that we first see him staring at the crashed wreckage of the *Concordia*, the carrier from *Wing Commander 2*, or that his new assignment is aboard a ship barely held together by rust and tradition.

## One desperate plan

That bleakness works beautifully, not least by giving the uplifting moments something to contrast with. As hammy as the acting often is, the captain's enthusiastic declaration of "God, I love that boy's spunk!" was so riveting, Origin made it the official soundcard test noise. There's a genuine warmth to it, and Blair's growing relationships with the *Victory*'s crew, helped by the fact that you get to walk around between missions and think of it as home, are in stark contrast to the way games like *X-Wing* and *Freespace 2* saved their focus for the combat.

Here, both sides matter. You can be chewed out for being antisocial and not engaging with the crew. You can even be called out for favoritism if you constantly fly with the same wingman. In one memorable moment, you can even let Blair go on a depression-induced bender before being forced into action by an enemy attack. Sadistically, it's one of the hardest fights in the game even if you're sober. All of this remains excellent stuff, and far more advanced than most interactive movies.

## Deep Space Whine

Actual combat on the other hand really struggles to be exciting. Even in the *Wing Commander* series' prime, fans of the *X-Wing* series would loudly proclaim how much better their space combat was. In our post-*Freespace 2* world, it's exceptionally hard to go back. The enemy AI is terrible, the once system-crushingly amazing graphics are no longer impressive, and only a few details, such as the visible cockpit, in-mission videos, and the fact that your wingmen can die for real, still feel like interesting enough quirks to be worth mentioning.

The best bits are firmly when the plot becomes more interactive, with choices

### READ ME

**RELEASE DATE**
1994

**PUBLISHER**
Origin Systems

**DEVELOPER**
Origin Systems

**WHAT WE SAID THEN**
"A fantastic interactive experience blending drama and action so skillfully that it will redefine multimedia standards." March 1995 issue, 96%

**GET IT**
$6—www.gog.com

**VIDEO GUIDE**
Let's Play Wing Commander 3
http://bit.ly/xn5OJV

**TRIVIA**
Everyone knows about the awful *Wing Commander* movie, but did you know there was a Saturday morning cartoon too? It was called *Wing Commander: Academy*, and against all odds, it was excellent. Like the games, it featured many heroic moments, but took a surprisingly mature approach to war—not simply death and loss, but showing the dilemmas of being in command and the clash of two races with very different approaches to honor.
For years, the only copies have been some low-quality TV rips. The whole series is coming to DVD in March though, and is worth a watch. Check out our write-up of the first episode at http://bit.ly/grf5pW.

**YOUR PC IN 1994**
486DX, 8MB RAM, 15" CRT monitor

**BEST SHIP:**
The *Excalibur*

**RUDEST KITTY**
Prince Thrakhath

like trying to dogfight a Kilrathi ace or return to your rapidly-fleeing carrier, but those happen all too rarely. Worse, the further you get, the harder it is to claw back from defeat. Early on, you'll often get a chance, but as of the second half, you're simply given a ring-side seat to watch the Kilrathi curb-stomp Earth.

Still, *Wing Commander 3* could definitely have aged worse, and the

**Sadistically, it's one of the hardest fights in the game even if you're sober.**

fact that you can switch on invulnerability in the options menu without any form of penalty means that you shouldn't let it put you off. At the very least, it's a great way to understand just what the hell convinced people that interactive movies were the future—from the cinematic style, to its ambition, to the way it used FMV to create a world instead of to cover a gaping hole where its soul should have been. It was an amazing game for its day, and it's still a movie worth starring in. ■

### OTHER 1994 GAMES WE ♥

**EARTHWORM JIM**
**Lucas:** Why can't every action platformer star a muscular, wise-cracking worm? With unforget table levels like hell-ishly-hot Heck and snot-rope bungee jumping with Major Mucus, variety was abound on the quest to defeat the vile Queen Slug-For-A-Butt.

**WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS**
**Tyler:** I still pine for the days when RTS games were as simple as they were in 1994: Orcs, meet humans. Now FIGHT! And I'll never forget my swordsmen's response to every order issued: "My Lord. Yes."

**BENEATH A STEEL SKY**
**Chris:** The first adven-ture game I ever played, and by far the best. Industrial-themed, post-apocalyptic, and terrifically written—its graphic novel opening grabbed my eyes and super-glued them to my CRT. Union City's always got a place on my hard drive.

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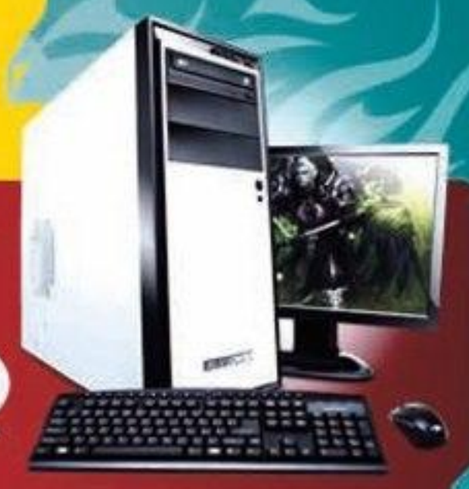

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# DOWNLOADS

FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB

## 1 Hit light speed

**FREEWARE** FLY OFF THE GRID IN **NITRONIC RUSH**

The lovechild of *Tron*, *TrackMania* and *Transformers*, *Nitronic Rush* is a time-trial racer made by students at the DigiPen Institute of Technology. They've dubbed it a "survival driving game," in which each course is divided into hazard-lined chunks.

Success is still a case of getting to the finish line as fast as possible, but each individual section can be replayed immediately if failed, each failure applying a penalty to your final score. It's a smart move that retains the pace of a racing game while still rewarding perfectionism.

Hazards range from simple pitfalls and blockades to rotating blades, massive ravines and fields of spikes that form in front of you as you hurtle forward. You've got several options to traverse these: your *Tron*-style car is fitted with rocket boosters that fire forward, back, down and to the sides, as well as retractable wings that pop out on request. These can be combined for sudden braking to jumping, rolling, and even flight.

The downside is that each rocket adds to a heat bar, and filling up your heat bar causes you to explode. Reaching the finish is thus a case of balancing the risk of driving around the obstacles against the risk of using rockets to power yourself over them—a quandary that you're asked to consider several times per race.

The game looks great. The team has obviously used *Tron* as the basis for its design, but has made it its own with a lot of incidental detail, moving scenery and dry humor lurking behind the scenes. While described as a tribute to the racers of the '90s, *Nitronic Rush* actually feels much more modern, easily able to pass for a commercial indie game.

The only caveat is that in order to get the most out of it you're going to need an Xbox 360 controller, as it's been designed with two analog sticks in mind—all those extra abilities make keyboard play a bit cumbersome. Regardless, this is a racing game well worth taking for a spin. **LS**

**SIZE** 467MB **LINK** bit.ly/nitronicrush

## 2 MOD

### CTRL+ALDMER+DELETE

SORT YOUR LIFE OUT WITH THESE *SKYRIM* USER INTERFACE MODS

**Let's not beat around the bush: *Skyrim*'s UI was not designed for a mouse and keyboard. Thankfully, the modding community is on hand to set things right.**

**SkyUI inventory**
Tabs for different item types, sorting by size, etc. Impressive stuff—can't wait for the full version. *bit.ly/pcgskyui*

**Categorized favorites menu**
You can now have a screen-filling list of all your preferred abilities pop up on demand. *bit.ly/pcgcustomfavs*

**A quality world map with roads**
Adds roads to the world map, helping you to avoid those awkward navigational *faux pas*. *bit.ly/pcgqualitymap*

**Better sorting**
Renames crafting materials, potions and soul gems so that they're ordered more usefully by name and quality. *bit.ly/pcgbettersort*



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# 3 Those who dare

**INDIE** SPEND SOME QUALITY TIME WITH YOURSELF AND THE BEST OF **LUDUM DARE 22**

The *Ludum Dare* competition challenges developers to create full games on a specified theme in only 48 hours. The 22nd competition, held in December 2011, was based on the concept "alone" and received over 890 entries. They vary wildly, from puzzle games to platformers, survival horror to satire. If you're interested in turning your hand to game development, this is a good place to learn more.

The best entries showcase ideas that could sustain full games, and some probably should. We've picked out three favorites, but take a look for yourself: chances are that the next big indie hit is lurking somewhere in there. **EL**

## The Word Alone

This puzzle game by Matt Rix is a test of spatial-reasoning and vocabulary all in one. It presents you with a jumbled grid of letters and asks you remove all but those contained in the word "alone" in as few moves as possible, by picking tiles that form three-letter words and using them to shunt other tiles around.

**SIZE** Web-based **LINK** bit.ly/wsFc9j

## Minicraft

Notch's entry is an isometric take on *Minecraft*. You'll still punch trees, but the goal this time is simply to develop to the point where you can kill the only other person in your randomly-generated world. You get one life only, giving it more of a roguelike feel.

**SIZE** Web-based **LINK** bit.ly/ynhRlp

## We Are Alone

You're dying of exposure and being pursued by wolves on a randomly-generated mountain. To escape, you'll need to track down a variety of items, but if you die, that's it: start over. Eerily, though, your previous footprints remain, as do the items you were carrying.

**SIZE** Web-based **LINK** bit.ly/w6bueD

# 4 MOD

## MONSTER MASH

REPEL THE COMBINED MIGHT OF THE '90S IN *AEONS OF DEATH V6.0*

If there were a *Super Smash Bros.* for PC gaming, it would look something like this *Doom II* mod. *Aeons of Death* randomizes the monsters and weapons of any level you happen to plug in to it, throwing in any FPS baddie you can think of.

It starts with the classics—*Duke Nukem*, *Quake*, *Hexen*—but quickly escapes the '90s to include

**That's right: you can fight a Cyberdemon alongside Barney, with the *Portal* gun.**

*Half-Life 2*, *Bulletstorm*, *Portal* and more. That's right: you can fight a Cyberdemon alongside Barney with the *Portal* gun—all in the *Doom II* engine. There's even a *Left 4 Dead* mode that fills levels with relentless hordes of zombies. Sold yet? **TW**

**SIZE** 314.7MB
**LINK** bit.ly/aeonsofdeath

Hell's all-star reunion gets a bit messy.

# MACHINIMA

## The **Minecraft** Death Star trench run

YouTuber Paradise Decay has recreated the entire Battle of Yavin in *Minecraft*. It took him four months, and everything you see was made by hand: from the two different Death Star models to Luke's X-Wing and Vader's TIE fighter. **CA**
*bit.ly/wHSMl0*

**Attack what?**

1 Unfortunately, *Minecraft* doesn't provide a means of locking S-foils in attack position, but glowstone blocks for the Rebel X- and Y-Wing starfighter engines are a nice touch.

**Watch yourself**

2 Cockpit cam is a man in a box surrounded by pieces of glass, while the camera shakes to give the impression that he's doing something exciting. So, pretty close to the movie.

**I'm hit!**

3 *Minecraft*'s rotating heads are ideal for R2-D2. The trench is lava-lit and full of turrets that, if you look closely, seem to fire grass. Environmentally friendly, the Empire.

**Great shot, kid**

4 Oh no! The Death Star is full of TNT. To be fair, that's only slightly less plausible than an open ventilation shaft that leads directly to a lethally vulnerable reactor core.

HOW TO...

HAVE MORE FUN WITH YOUR FAVORITE GAMES

# Find the craziest toys in Steelport

## GET STARTED

**DIFFICULTY** Easy

**TIME** 5 hours

**VITAL LINKS:**

The Saints Row Wiki
***bit.ly/SaintsWiki***

Saints Row Commuinity Page
**bit.ly/SaintsStats**

The *PC Gamer* guide to being a toilet
**bit.ly/SaintsLoo**

PHIL SAVAGE'S GUIDE TO BEING SILLY IN **SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD**

*Saints Row: The Third* is fully insane, pushing twenty-first century excess way past any logical conclusion. Part hip-hop obsession with sex and celebrity, part hyper-violent action movie at its most infantile; you could accuse it of being satirical if it didn't seem to be having so much fun.

It's also an exhibitionist. In an open-world game clearly dedicated to messing around, there's always the temptation to skip the story in favor of causing havoc on the streets. Don't. Some of the best stuff to be found comes from completing the main missions, where the game can show off its goodies in gloriously over-the-top set-pieces.

But there's plenty to find outside of the Third Street Saints' tale of revenge and marketing opportunities. This guide collects the best of its crazy secrets—both things to find around Steelport, and recommendations for what to choose in story missions with multiple rewards. Don't worry about spoilers. The best moments arise from the game's continual ability to surprise at how far it will go for a cheap laugh, so mission and plot details are kept as vague as possible.

## 1 Upgrade your pistols

Your starting pistol, the .45 Shepherd, isn't the most exciting weapon you'll encounter in Steelport. Upgrade it at a Friendly Fire store though, and it will be one of the most effective. At Level 4 not only is the simple pistol unrivalled in damage and accuracy, it gains explosive rounds that cause enemies to ragdoll around beautifully as they die. Combine it with the Dual Wield ability and it'll see you through the game and ensure that your enemies get plenty of aerobatic aerobics.

## 2 Start chemical warfare

With so many weapons and upgrades competing for your money, it's easy to overlook *SR3*'s only non-lethal weapon. That would be a mistake. Upgrade the flashbang grenades to Level 4 and they become the formidable "Fart In a Jar." It's exactly what it sounds like: a container full of noxious gas that causes anyone caught in its wide area of effect to gag and vomit, helpless against your other, more deadly, weapons (such as the aforementioned explosive rounds).

## 3 Invest in transport

Cars are all fine and good, but sometimes you want to take a more direct route to your destination. Buy Rondini's Boat Dock and the Airplane Hangar at Wesley Cutter International and you'll be given a selection of boats and planes to choose from. The picks of the bunch are the Commander, a tough military boat with a .50 caliber machine gun and mounted rockets, and the AB Destroyer attack plane, which is based on the real-life A-10 Thunderbolt II.

## 4 Get to the chopper

Complete the fifth mission, Party Time, and the Saints gain their very own Headquarters and, more importantly, a helipad. Now to put something on it. Head to the National Guard Base, located on the unmarked island east of the Downtown district, and grab the Eagle. The National Guard won't be too pleased about your visit, but that's hardly a problem when you're in the game's deadliest helicopter.

## 5 Burn your enemies

If you find yourself mourning the late Johnny Gat, there's a fitting tribute to be found and exploited on the streets of Steelport. The Gat Mobile is a van with a giant Jonny Gat head mounted on the front. The cigarette in his mouth? Actually a flamethrower. While it's quite rare to see Gat's head driving around on the open road, a parked Gat Mobile spawns next to Planet Saints in north Yearwood.

## 6 Clean up the streets

Take most cars to a Rim Jobs garage and you can set some basic customization options, from the color to a choice of gaudy spoilers. Take one of the commonly seen street sweepers to a garage, however, and you can upgrade it into a spiked monstrosity that would make Mad Max proud. It still handles like a piece of crap, but it'll easily shunt anything you crash into out of the way. Now just work on a few trash-related one-liners to complete the effect.



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## 7 Make mobile bombs

You'll gain the RC Possessor as a reward for completing Act 1. In its standard form it's a largely pointless device for remotely controlling any civilian car. Upgrade it to Level 3, however, and you can use it to detonate them, filling the game with infinitely respawning and fully manoeuvrable bombs. It's perfect for clearing Gang Operations, as rival gang members will appear near their now deadly vehicles.

## 8 Download a car

Those old anti-piracy ads don't really apply to the Saints. Not only *would* they steal a car, they'd happily pirate one too. Complete all three Trail Blazer activities located in the Deckers' territory and the Wraith car and X-2 Phantom bike will be added to your garage. These sleek neon vehicles are taken from the Deckers' *Tron*-like version of the internet, and rate among the fastest (and coolest looking) in the game.

## 9 Steal a jet

When STAG, the anti-gang squad, arrives midway through Act 2, you get a whole new set of destructive vehicles. Most of them, like the awesome Crusader tank, you'll have to take the hard way, by building notoriety and stealing them when they come after you. Fortunately, STAG's best toy, the F-69 VTOL jet, is parked in its makeshift base in the north-west section of the park in Sunset Park, just waiting to be snatched up.

## 10 Get oversized fists

Complete the mission Murderbrawl XXXI and you're given a choice: spare your opponent or unmask him—the ultimate insult for a luchador wrestler. Spare him. While helping your enemies save face might not seem in keeping with the Saints' usual approach to conflict resolution, the reward is worth it. You'll gain the Apoca-Fists, a melee weapon that instagibs pedestrians and destroys vehicles in just a few punches.

## 11 Make a hover bike

During the My Name Is Cyrus mission, you're asked to choose two of three potential research projects. Whether you pick the Satchel Charges or the upgraded Crusader tank is down to personal preference. Just make sure you select the hover bike. It doesn't simply float a couple of inches off the ground, it has the same functionality as a VTOL jet, but is small and nimble to boot.

## 12 Survive a zombie invasion

There are plenty of melee weapons available, but your enemies have an unsporting habit of bringing guns to a dildo fight. Head to the Extras section of your phone and enter the code "brains" to turn the citizens of Steelport into mindless zombies. They're ridiculously weak, but the sheer number of them is guaranteed to provide a challenge.

SKILLS

## ESSENTIAL UPGRADES

BUY THESE TO STAY SAFE

1 Combat Upgrades allow you to withstand more of a specific type of damage. The two to prioritize are the bullet and vehicle upgrades—they're what you'll be taking the most damage from during the campaign.

2 While you'll clash with rival gangs early and often, it's the cops that provide the most consistent threat throughout the game. With the Notoriety: Cops upgrade you'll lose them much faster, saving you from finding a hideout.

3 Sprint not only allows you to quickly get away from damage, it helps you perform instant car thefts and quick takedowns. You can increase your sprint meter by up to 100% to ensure that you'll never run out of stamina at a key moment.

BONUS TIP

## GET RESPECT

Grab a helicopter, find the Luchadores turf and start blowing up their cars. They can't retaliate, so you'll easily build cash and Respect.

# PUSH START ON A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

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TESTED

# Core i7-3960X

## Intel

By now, unless you live under a Vibranium rock, you've probably heard of Intel's glorious Core i7-2600K. The chip, code-named "Sandy Bridge," single-handedly leveled the competition and was ridiculously damned cheap for the power it offered.

So what's better than Sandy Bridge? How about Sandy Bridge-E?! That's the silly moniker for Intel's newest wunderkind: a chip meant to bump up CPU to extreme levels of performance. Basically, Sandy Bridge-E takes those efficiently fast cores found in a standard Sandy Bridge chip and moves them to a bigger chip. But the most noticeable—and awesome—difference between the original Sandy Bridge and Sandy Bridge-E is the addition of *two more cores* in the highest-end Core i7-3960X chip (for six cores total as opposed to four).

LGA2011 supports quad-channel RAM and ostensibly replaces LGA1366.

Like the original, The Sandy Bridge-E also moves the PCIe expansion-slot control from a chip in the motherboard directly into the CPU itself. And, even cooler, it uses the new PCIe 3.0 spec which doubles the effective speed over PCIe 2.0. Although I haven't tested it, AMD is reporting that its next-generation PCIe 3.0 compliant card (the Radeon HD 7970) offers about a five to 10 percent performance boost going from PCIe 2.0 to PCIe 3.0.

### 32GB of RAM, anyone?

The Core i7-3960X is also the first chip I've seen to offer quad-channel RAM support. Not only does it offer a measureable 100 percent increase in memory bandwidth over a dual-channel Core i7-2600K, it also offers up to eight slots to fill with RAM. With current RAM prices, that would let you build or buy a system with 32GB of RAM for under $200 using eight 4GB sticks. To get to 32GB with a Core i7-2600 or any LGA1155 chip, you'd have to spend closer to $1,000 using far pricier 8GB memory sticks. Sure, no games will even come close to using 32GB today, but the extra memory can be used to build an incredibly fast RAM drive offering up to 5GB/s read speeds (or about 10 times that of an SSD).

As is typical with Intel, the new chip also requires a new socket. Whereas the original Core i7-2600K used an LGA1155 socket, the new Core i7-3960X uses a much larger LGA2011 socket (shown right there to your left). So unfortunately, if you want to upgrade, you'll have to ditch your old chipset and fork over the greenbacks for a new LGA2011 mobo.

In the land of performance, the Core i7-3960X makes no apologies for its blatant excess of power. In applications that use all of its cores, such as video editing or 3D rendering, it's simply the fastest chip on the planet. The only issue, unfortunately, is in games. As fast as the Core i7-3960X is, gaming today is still mostly about the videocard. And something that's bottlenecked by the speed of your GPU isn't going to run faster with the Core i7-3960X. That's not true for everything, of course, as games that aren't gated by the GPU provide a substantial performance bump over even the Core i7-2600K. There are also indications that games such as *Skyrim* need a big fat CPU, and an equally beefy GPU to run at maximum quality.

So should you buy a 3960X? Depends on your needs. If you play games exclusively and your PC isn't for working on digital photography or 3D rendering, the Core i7-2600K still makes a lot more sense. If, however, you game on your PC and you work on it with intensive applications, the extra cores, extra bandwidth and extra memory support is very much worth it. ■

***Gordon Mah Ung***

### Benchmarks

| | 3DMARK 11 | Dirt 2 (fps) | Far Cry 2 (fps) | Unigine (fps) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3.4GHz Core i7-2600K | 6,469 | **189** | 202 | 54.2 |
| **3.3GHz Core i7-3960X** | **6,732** | 187 | **253** | **54.4** |

### VERDICT

The 3960X is the fastest CPU Intel has ever made for consumers, but it's sorta overkill for gaming and comes with a steep price tag.

PC GAMER **92**

TESTED

# Another dimension

Nvidia's 3D Vision 2 arrives! Are the changes worth the cash? ***by Justin Amirkhani***

What's kept you from splurging on a 3D setup for your gaming rig? The price? Dim displays? Those glasses? If you've passed on 3D so far for these or any other reasons, Nvidia wants you to come back for another look. OK, you still have to wear the glasses, but its second-generation 3D Vision 2 kit boosts the battery life and lens size, while a new display implementation called LightBoost brightens the image considerably compared to the first generation of 3D-capable displays. The active-shutter glasses and LightBoost display still don't come cheap, though, so let's zoom in on both to see if the pair might justify adding a new dimension to your games.

## VG278H 3D Display

Asus

3D gaming has made considerable progress over the past few years, but it has yet to offer a full-featured package that delivers the goods without busting into your life savings. The high price tag has also, in effect, magnified some of 3D's deficits: if the display was expensive and the image seemed too dim compared to 2D displays, for example, it was that much easier to take a pass. From that perspective, the pricey VG278H from Asus won't make the choice a slam-dunk for most folks, but it's nonetheless a substantial improvement in 3D gaming.

The VG278H is the among the first crop of displays to support LightBoost, a standard developed by Nvidia that reduces ghosting (a faint, secondary image that makes images appear fuzzy) and increases brightness dramatically during 3D use. If you rejected 3D before as a result of dim, slightly discolored rendering, you have to check out a LightBoost display: it's bright and the colors are crisp. It's *amazing*.

The 27-inch display has a native resolution of 1920x1080 (120 fewer pixels than we'd generally prefer) and you'll find HDMI 1.4, DVI and VGA ports in the rump. The stand can be adjusted for both angle and height, but overall it's not the most aesthetically pleasing LCD—the bezel is a bit thicker than most in its class, and the 3D emitter that syncs with 3D glasses bulges out of the top of the frame like a little crown.

Images in 2D and 3D come across crystal clear with no glare thanks to a high-quality, backlit matte screen, and the 120Hz, 2ms refresh rate keeps fast-paced games sharp as expected. And here's a very welcome bonus: the on-screen display is slick and easy to navigate, so you might actually use the video mode presets that are a drag to activate in most displays.

Yes, the price hovers around about twice what you'd pay for an entry-level display of this size. But the VG278H is definitely worth the extra dough. LightBoost works, and it makes a huge difference in 3D gaming—regardless of whether you're using Nvidia's first- or second-generation 3D Vision specs.

If you're hesitant—at $600, we understand—check out the VG278H's 3D image for yourself at a retail store or order one from an online vendor with a generous return policy. It's a terrific display overall, but when you put on the 3D glasses—that's when this baby shines, and shines bright. ■

PC GAMER 90

◆ *$600* ◆ *www.asus.com* ◆ *Category: Mid*

You've never really choked a thug until you've done it in 3D.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★



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# 3D Vision 2 Glasses

Nvidia

If you've already invested in Nvidia's first-generation 3D Vision glasses, you don't have to agonize about upgrading to 3D Vision 2. The list of supported games is the same, the technology driving the 3D rendering is identical, and because Nvidia's new LightBoost technology is monitor-dependent, you don't need new glasses to enjoy its benefits.

On the other hand, if your budget can swing it, you're unlikely to be disappointed by the upgrade. The 3D Vision 2 wireless specs offer a longer battery life (about a third longer in our tests, which is pretty impressive), and the lenses are 20 percent larger so you also get a wider viewing area.

(If you own a 3D Vision 2-compatible display that has an infrared emitter already built-in, you only need the glasses themselves. If you don't, you can purchase the kit that includes the emitter as well as all the necessary cables.)

Nvidia passed up on a major rethinking of the overall design, but the cumulative effect of all the tweaks is considerable. The frames themselves now have a more handsome matte finish, and extrusions on the insides of the frames do a better job of blocking out ambient light. And unless you're inclined to strut around with saucer-sized hipster glasses, the 3D Vision 2 frames fit better with prescription eyewear than the previous model.

Considering how important it is that the glasses remain comfortable—ideally, you ought to be barely aware that you're wearing them—it's disappointing that the rigid arms pinch a bit too strongly on the sides of your head. This pressure isn't adjustable, and you don't dare pull on the arms to try to relax them a bit. The pinch is immediately noticeable, and combined with the increased weight of the glasses overall, becomes more annoying the longer you wear them.

I'd have preferred a design that made the glasses lighter and easier to wear for hours at a time: the larger viewing area of the lenses isn't enough of much of a plus unless you sit very close to your display. And with many retailers selling the original 3D Vision kit at about half the price of the new version, newcomers may be better off avoiding the latest and greatest in favor of the tried and true. ■

PC GAMER 73

◆ *$99 (Glasses); $150 (Kit)* ◆ *www.nvidia.com* ◆ *Category: Entry*

# State of the tech

## Nvidia's 3D Vision: who it's right for, and why you should use it

Nvidia's 3D Vision isn't for everyone. There are practical issues—it's still a minor annoyance to put on the glasses (or recharge them), you need a pretty beefy GPU, and the hardware isn't cheap—but these issues are becoming increasingly minor. The technology now offers an incredible level of support for pretty much any game you might be interested in playing, so whether or not it's for you really boils down to how much you'll pause to appreciate the environments that 3D enhances.

It's a very different feeling to walk through a battlefield with foregrounds and backgrounds at perceivable distances, and it absolutely wraps you up in the experience. This increased sense of immersion, however, does very little for those who play competitively—the added perspective requires extra focus which hardcore players won't want to spare. I'd often find myself diving into a *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* match with the 3D features enabled, only to turn them off after noticing a sharp decline in personal performance. The same would happen in *Need for Speed: The Run*, where quick responses are mandatory. For all the expense poured into my setup, it turned out to be a multiplayer handicap.

Single-player games such as *Batman: Arkham City* and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, however, were greatly enhanced by the added depth. Likewise, the sweeping vistas of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* felt all the more majestic in 3D, and the detail in *L.A. Noire*'s facial expressions were more pronounced. Even strategy games like *Civilization V* and *StarCraft II* got a boost in fidelity. In every game I played which didn't require precision, the 3D effect added something that regular high-definition displays just couldn't offer.

Adrenaline junkies will discover that their favorite twitch-shooters still aren't built with 3D in mind, but those of us who enjoy things less competitively will be able to appreciate the technology and the experience offers. If you want to soak in game worlds with a new sense of perspective, Nvidia's 3D Vision 2 is worth the price, but if your gaming habits tend toward rapid-fire precision, you may find that the addition of depth is just another distraction for your overworked senses.

### Five 3D Vision-supported games you *must* play

Although there are still a few games with exclusive licenses tied to AMD's 3D technology, there's an incredible library of games for players with an Nvidia 3D Vision 1 or 2 setup to enjoy. Of course, not all experiences are created equal. As such, here are the best games of the bunch, in a handy list. Grab 'em now!

- **The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**
- **L.A. Noire**
- **StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty**
- **Star Wars: The Old Republic**
- **Batman: Arkham City**

PHOTOS BY DAN FITZPATRICK

# Hale82 Series 850W PSU

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

## NZXT

The Hale82 looks sleek enough that I'd feel comfortable displaying it on my desk, let alone burying it in the belly of my rig. Underneath its shiny black finish is a stamped-steel casing and aluminum grill pieced together with matching steel screws. Inside of all that metal, the Hale82 plays host to a single +12-volt rail that offers over-voltage, under-voltage, and short circuit protection. The Hale82's single 120mm two-ball bearing fan puts out a heck of a lot of wind with a minimal amount of sound. Once sealed inside my tower and kicked into high gear, the noise level never got over 35 decibels—which is pretty noteworthy.

The power supply comes with a number of modular, flat-braided extension cables that ensure that individuals installing the Hale82 in a full tower will have the reach they need to juice their components, and gamers with small- to mid-sized towers can keep the insides of their rigs looking neat with shorter cables. It's little touches like this that make the difference between a passable product and one I feel comfortable paying a little bit extra for. (And while you might be able to get away with no-name components in other areas, you *always* want to stick with power supplies from a brand with a good reputation—or risk shortening the lifetime of your components with grimy power.)

But priced at a lofty $139, do you want or need it in your system? Hell yes, especially when you factor in the Hale82's five-year warranty and three-day hardware turnaround guarantee. Considering all of these premium features, it's actually a small price to pay. ■

PC GAMER 93

***Seamus Bellamy***

*$140 ◆ http://bit.ly/w996Va ◆ Category: Dream*

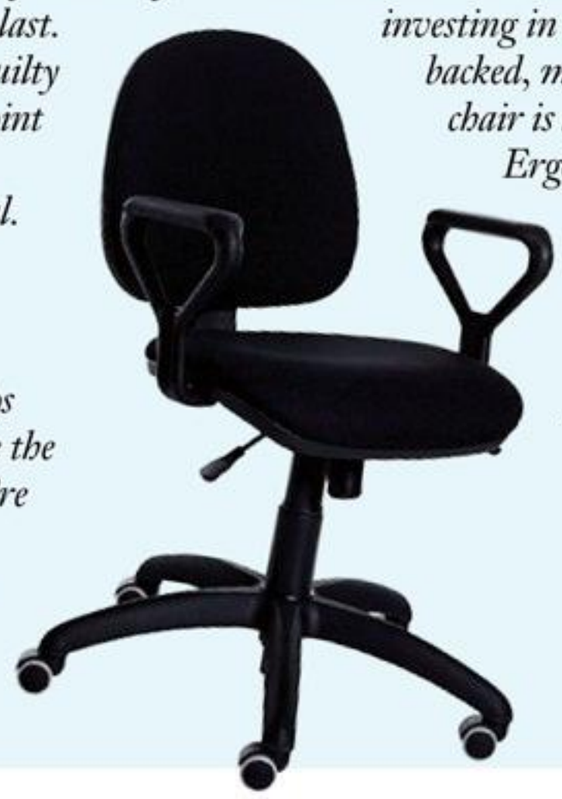
# Q&A

## It's all in the posture

**Q:** I've always been a heavy console gamer, but finally saw the light and picked up a gaming PC at a Black Friday sale this past November. But when I sit in front of my PC for three or four hours at a time, I'm finding I've got aches and pains by the time I'm done. When it comes to a long PS3 session, I never have this problem, Any suggestions?

**A:** *You're not the first gamer to suffer at the hands of the hobby, and sadly, you won't be the last. Desk chairs are certainly guilty of generating muscle and joint horrors, but consoles and arcades can be just as brutal.* Space Invader *Wrist,* Pac-Man *Arm and Nintendonitis have been afflicting couch-commandos and quarter-pumpers since the 1970s, though perhaps you're just less accustomed to playing at a desk. Here's a list of pointers to help make your PC gaming marathons a little more manageable, and a lot less painful.*

*While using a mouse and keyboard, change the position of your chair so that you're sitting with your elbows tucked into your sides and your forearms are parallel to the ground. At the same time, you'll want to make sure that your feet are planted firmly on the floor (no footrests!). Finally, ensure that your lower back is right up against the back of your chair while you play, and resist the urge to lean in and hunch over. Of course, investing in a quality, high-backed, multi-adjustable chair is also a good idea. Ergonomics might not make you a better performer, but your body will feel a lot less like you've been mugged after your next rage-quit.*



Desk chair or torture device? It all depends on how you sit in it.

# Hard Stuff Trinity

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# SEVEN ways to tell if the player is into you

## A companion's guide to romance in *The Old Republic*

### 1 Has the player personally given you more than 300 identical belts?

While receiving one of these only signifies a passing interest in you, getting hundreds is a clear sign of true love. Wait until 400 to be sure they're serious, then take your relationship to the next level with confidence.

### 2 Does the player pause, sometimes for minutes at a time, before replying to you?

Don't worry, this is a good sign. It means they're carefully considering which dialogue option will score them the most Affection points with you—it's the player equivalent of caring. That, or they're AFK.

### 3 Does the player sometimes stop talking to you, briefly leave the room, and then begin exactly the same conversation over again?

Now you know they're serious. If they insist on hearing your every potential response to every question they can ask you, then they're not just interested—they're trying to make everything perfect.

### 4 Did the world unexpectedly go dark during a tender moment with your player?

Congratulations, you've had sex! This is one of the strongest signs the player is interested in you, or at least mildly horny. Don't worry about the fact that you have no recollection of what happened—this is completely normal.

### 5 Has your player ever refused to group with friends just so they don't have to dismiss you?

If they're willing to put up with kill-stealing and loot confusion just to keep you around, you know they're serious. Or that most of their friends couldn't heal a bacta tank.

### 6 Does your player never send you on Crew Missions?

Keep calm, they probably just want to keep you close. Contrary to common wisdom, being ordered to crawl around in a Sarlacc's stomach looking for gemstones is not always a sign of affection. Be glad that they sent the annoying protocol droid instead.

### 7 Does your player ignore other companions, even the ones who look suspiciously identical to you?

This doesn't mean they're not attracted to you! Quite the opposite: ignoring your identical counterparts is how players convince themselves that they're the only person in the universe you're hanging out with. We know the truth, but don't shatter their delusion.

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